

# THE WAR UP TO DATE

By  
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Maps by  
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Aussie airmen, co-operating with Americans, dealt out severe punishment to Japanese air-raiders and sea transport. Australian troops also, in face of heavy odds, clung with grim tenacity and indomitable valour to their remaining footholds in New Guinea. The rather gloomy outlook in the Far Eastern theatre of the war, due to our temporary loss of sea supremacy, was relieved by one brilliantly successful operation of immense strategic significance.

To forestall a Japanese occupation of Madagascar, which would have cut our sea communications with the Middle East, Russia, India and Australia, we took swift and effective action. A British Expeditionary Force, escorted by a strong naval squadron, effected a landing on the island. The French finally surrendered, and the British squadron steamed into Diego Suarez Bay, one of the finest harbours in the world, and an invaluable naval base from which the Allied fleets may later conduct crucial operations.

Japan's entry in the active war arena had momentous and historic consequences destined to have decisive effects on this world-wide conflict. From the moment of the felonious attack on Pearl Harbour, President Roosevelt stood at the head of a solidly united and fiercely determined American nation. American Isolationists ceased to exist. In both hemispheres U.S.A. was in the war up to the hilt. Mr. Churchill, with a retinue of Service and other experts, crossed the Atlantic to Washington, where concerted Allied plans were settled, and it was agreed, scrapping all Lease-and-Lend niceties, to pool absolutely all resources in a united effort to destroy for ever the Axis menace to free humanity. There were scenes of tumultuous enthusiasm, which will be enduring landmarks in history, when the British Prime Minister, whose half-British, half-American parentage seemed to symbolize Anglo-Saxon destiny in the shaping, addressed the U.S. Senate and Congress. Later he visited Canada and spoke in the Parliament House in Ottawa.

When Mr. Churchill left for England, President Roosevelt gripped his hand. "We will see this through to the end," he said. That high resolve, endorsed by the leaders and peoples of America, Russia, China and Britain, echoes round the world with a message of sustaining hope to all the martyred lands of stoic sorrows now under the Axis heel.

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## INTERMEZZO TO ARMAGEDDON

**H**ISTORY unfolds no more fantastic or tragic chapter than the sequence of events whereby the joybells of 11th November, 1918, were followed less than twenty-one years later by the thunder of another super-mechanized Armageddon. After nearly five years of deadly conflict, costing millions of lives and billions of treasure, Germany, the rattle of whose sabre had menaced Europe for half a century, was down and out, her army beaten and disbanded, her fleet ignominiously surrendered, her autocratic monarchy deposed in favour of a Socialist Republic.

Not a living soul can have foreseen, on Armistice Day, 1918, that in less than a generation not only Europe but the whole world would be faced by the menace of a still more formidable Germany, armed to the teeth, inspired by the same old *über Alles* ambition, more arrogant than ever in her military renaissance, intent on subjugating continents. The story of this renaissance reads like a madman's dream.

It dates from the rise in Germany of the Nazi Party, whose figurehead was a disgruntled Austrian ne'er-do-well, a house-decorator and amateur dauber of picture postcards. Adolf Hitler, son of a minor Customs official who changed his name from Schickelgruber to Hitler, was born at Braunau on 20th April, 1889. Habitué of cheap doss-houses, nursing a frustrated art ambition, and embittered against all more fortunate mortals, especially the Jews, he served in the last war with the German Army as a battalion runner, and achieved the rank of lance-corporal.

An epic fable has been woven round the Iron Cross he wears on his Führer's tunic—over a bullet-proof vest—but the truth is that it was a post-War decoration from General Ludendorff, with whom he was associated in a first abortive Nazi rising at Munich. A term of imprisonment followed this escapade, during which Hitler dictated his notorious book, *Mein Kampf*,

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stop him now in a fortnight: in five years' time you may not be able to stop him at all." But nobody stirred a finger in active opposition.

From that moment Hitler's prestige began to be firmly established in Germany. His political infallibility steadily grew into a legend. He moved from strength to strength, from audacity to audacity. Early in 1935 he denounced the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, yet it came as a profound shock to France when the Baldwin Government promptly made a Naval Pact with Germany whereby the latter country was allowed to build up to a fixed percentage of our own strength in all classes of warships, with actually a larger percentage in the case of U-boats. This obviously gave tacit and deliberate assent to Germany's repudiation of the Versailles clauses. It not only condoned but actually sanctioned Hitler's policy. From that moment all barriers were down, and the path lay free and open for Germany's military come-back.

Having with characteristic callous treachery connived at the cold-blooded murder of many of his leading Nazi associates of earlier days, the men by whose devotion he scrambled to power, Hitler next proceeded to annex Austria. Then followed the overrunning of Czechoslovakia. These triumphs he achieved, apart from the murder of Dollfuss, the Austrian Chancellor, by the mere threat of *force majeure*. In strict accordance with his *Mein Kampf* philosophy, Hitler proclaimed that each step he took, each fresh encroachment, would be his last. The responsible custodians of Europe's law and order each time ignored the outrage and accepted the assurance. It was Nelson's gallant blind-eye tactics adapted to the ignoble safety-first theories of Dogberry. The British House of Commons greeted with hysterical cheers Mr. Neville Chamberlain's elate return from his Munich mission, bearing the pledge of "peace in our time"—guaranteed by the autograph, cheek by jowl with his own, of the author of *Mein Kampf*.

Too late the European democracies, lapt in wishful thinking, believing what they hoped, awoke to the realization that, though the League of Nations might represent International Law,

to a fellow-prisoner, Rudolf Hess, a man of far superior education to himself. *My Struggle* is a turgid volume of rambling rodomontade and half-baked political philosophy.

But it has become the Bible of Nazism, of which every German household must by decree possess a copy, and by its author's fiftieth birthday over five million copies had been printed. It reveals with revolting frankness the whole theory and soul of Hitlerism in all its ruthless brutality. It expounds ferocious contempt for democracy and popular opinion, utter disregard for all pledges or solemn covenants, cynical derision for all accepted codes of honour or human obligations, and, in brief, applies to international relations the thug concepts of criminal gangsterism. As a literary production *Mein Kampf* is beneath contempt. As a code of political ethics it is outside the pale of decent humanity.

Yet it boldly states the two guiding principles of Hitler's unparalleled public career—the Roman axiom that one must divide to rule, and the Napoleonic dictum that the paramount human instinct is fear. Fiasco overtook the first Nazi attempt to secure electoral support. But in 1932, by specious but astute appeal to a Germany in desperate economic straits and with over six millions unemployed workers, the Nazi Party achieved the largest following in the Reichstag of any single group: and in January 1933, the ex-Austrian down-and-out assumed as Chancellor of Germany the mantle that once Prince Bismarck had worn.

From that moment, while the bemused Chancelleries of Europe gaped and twiddled their thumbs, Hitler proceeded step by step to tear up the potent clauses of the Versailles Peace Treaty; and Germany with furious but furtive energy prepared to overwhelm Europe with another war. At first Hitler's audacity scared even his own General Staff. With grave misgiving they reluctantly consented to the reoccupation by the German Army of the demilitarized Rhineland zone. But only on condition that the troops marched with empty cartouches, and that on the first show of opposition they should be withdrawn. Marshal Pilsudski, the veteran Polish patriot and Dictator, wrote at that time to the French Premier: "You can



POLAND OVERWHELMED  
SEPTEMBER 1939

THE mechanism of Hitler's "power politics" was simple and methodical. He demanded more "living room" for the German Herrenvolk, or overlords, and employed well-drilled agitators to foment artificial unrest among Germans who had settled in adjoining States. He then proceeded to "rescue" them by the naïve process of incorporating those States in the Reich. A similar process would justify him in grabbing all countries where a German minority exists—including South Africa and the U.S.A.

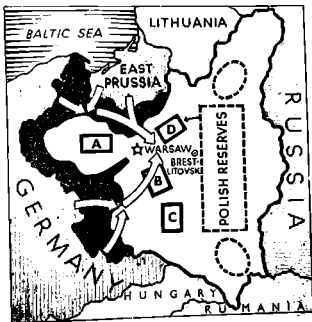
In the case of Austria and Czechoslovakia he had literally a walk-over. It was smash-and-grab robbery on an international scale, with the only difference that, instead of half a brick or a spanner, Germany threw a few tank battalions, not through the window, but over the border. The Austrians went quietly; but the Czechs, one of the sturdiest and most progressive races in Europe, wanted to fight for their country and liberty.

To avoid war, statesmen in London and Paris persuaded them in the autumn of 1938 to allow Germany to have the Sudeten area, where the Germans were chiefly located, but six months later Hitler proceeded to occupy the whole country. Thereby a million stout-hearted and well-armed Czech soldiers were lost to the Allies' cause, and Hitler secured, without a blow, many hundreds of planes and tanks and the famous Czech munition factory.

Germany's quarrel with Poland, with whom Hitler had made a solemn pact of non-aggression, was worked up by similar methods over what was called the Danzig Corridor, a creation of the Treaty of Versailles. France and Britain made fervent diplomatic efforts to restrain Germany, and President Roosevelt also intervened; but Hitler's plans were cut-and-

Geneva's lofty edifices were but "the insubstantial fabric of a dream" so long as Germany and the Axis stood for the Strong Arm. As well might a bench of J.P.'s hope to function while the only police force was controlled by the criminal underworld. Germany had been conceded seven years' start in a lethal rearmament race for the enslavement of Europe. The dramatic sequel came on Sunday, 3rd September, 1939, when the British Prime Minister, within barely a year of his Munich triumph, informed a more sombre and realistic House of Commons that Hitler had unleashed his panzer divisions against Poland, and we were once more at war with Germany. What steadfast valour had so grimly won, at so great travail, had somehow been thrown away. The valiant bones of a million British warriors, who gave their lives in "the War to end war," had been made a futile largesse to the fields of Death.

itself in an eight-pronged attack converging on Warsaw. The eight German prongs resembled the flanges of an open fan, all converging on the handle, which was the Polish capital. To meet this carefully planned assault by 73 German divisions, the Poles could muster only 30, and against the swarms of German tanks and planes the Poles had exactly 320 planes and 200 tanks. Most of the Polish planes, moreover, were destroyed on the ground, before they had time to get into the air, by German bombers. Added to other heavy odds was the fact that Fifth Columnism was rampant behind the Polish lines.



2. SITUATION 9th SEPTEMBER, 1939

*D: Polish reserves advancing.*



## 1. SITUATION 1st SEPTEMBER, 1939

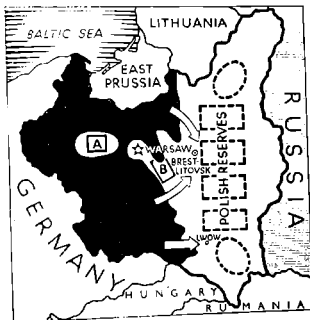
*Black lines: German attack. White squares: Polish light forces. A, B, C: Main Polish armies. 3, 2, 1: Vital Polish railway communications, bombed by the Germans in that order.*

dried. As soon as he had protected himself by a Pact with Russia he delivered simultaneously an ultimatum—with a grotesque time limit—and his mechanized attack. Even had the Poles been willing to accept Germany's terms, they were given no time to do so before the thundering steel avalanche was upon them.

On 1st September, 1939, the German Army, about 1,500,000 strong, with thousands of tanks and planes, threw off the palpable pretence of a manoeuvre concentration, and launched

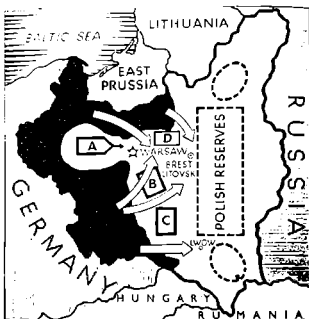
column advancing due north from East Prussia; one from Pomerania in the north-west across the rivers Brda and Vistula; one slightly more south towards Poznań; one towards Łódź; one towards Częstochowa; one towards Cracow; one towards Zakopane; and one from the south through Upper Silesia.

The Poles put up a desperate resistance, the quality of which can be gauged both by what happened later to France, and by the splendid fighting valour shown by Polish troops and airmen who have since then distinguished themselves in action against



4. SITUATION 16th SEPTEMBER, 1939

*Army A trapped at Kutno. Army B moves up to defend Warsaw.*

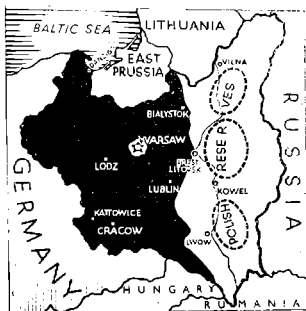


## 3. SITUATION 14th SEPTEMBER, 1939

*Army A retreats towards Warsaw.*

Telegraphs and telephones were cut, defence works were sabotaged, carefully prepared road-mines disconnected. German paratroops, indiscriminately attacking civilians, helped to demoralize the population and to upset the Polish Army's communications. Unlike the original Czechoslovakian frontier, which had its own powerful Maginot Line strongly held, Poland's frontier was singularly unsuited to effective strategic defence; and, though prayers were publicly offered up for rain, magnificent dry summer weather greatly helped the invaders. The fanlike formation of the German attack included one

# POLAND OVERWHELMED



5. SITUATION 19th SEPTEMBER, 1939

*Warsaw isolated. Russian advance overwhelms Polish reserves.*

von Fritsch, formerly German Commander-in-Chief, was killed. He had lost favour with Hitler, and fought in a subordinate position. Whether he actually fell to a Polish bullet, or was quietly murdered by Hitler's private assassins, remains uncertain.

Things were in desperate straits with Poland when, on Sunday, 17th September, one hundred Russian divisions administered the *coup de grâce* by suddenly crossing Poland's eastern frontier in rapid advance. Moscow told the Polish Ambassador that this action was taken because it was obvious the Polish Army was defeated, the Polish Government disintegrated,

the common foe side by side with our own troops and R.A.F. At several points, notably at Rybnik on the Carpathian sector and at Rawicz and Leszno in the west, they actually checked the formidable German invasion machine for a time. But the odds were impossible, and soon the way lay open to Cracow, ancient capital of Poland and vital railway centre. Within three days the thrust from East Prussia was only forty miles from Warsaw, and the German forces advancing from the south were only sixty miles away. The Polish Government moved a hundred miles south-east to Lublin, whilst all Warsaw's able-bodied citizens, women as well as men, desperately dug trenches to defend the city to the last. Within a fortnight the invaders held about a third of Poland in their iron grip, including the chief industrial centres. The room in the historic Belvedere Palace where—four years before—Poland's famous deliverer, the veteran Marshal Pilsudski, had breathed his last, was wrecked by a German bomb.

Both the British and American Ambassadors bore witness to the ruthlessly indiscriminate nature of the German air attack. The Luftwaffe, here as elsewhere, deliberately bombed and machine-gunned civilians—men, women, and children—and the plight of the wretched crowds of refugees, fleeing for safety from the advancing Hun hordes, was pitiable in the extreme. Trains were wrecked, roads littered by abandoned cars for which there was no petrol, and all the time overhead roared and zoomed the swastika terror squadrons.

Whilst General Brauchitsch, who commanded the German forces, was directing his columns on Warsaw, desperate fighting was going on in Danzig, where the naval depot was grimly held against attack by land and sea until half the small garrison had become casualties. Other Polish troops fought their way out of the Corridor to join their comrades in the inferno round Warsaw, which experienced day and night raids by the Luftwaffe as the German ground troops closed in on the doomed capital. Though constantly and hopelessly driven back, the Polish Army managed to keep its cohesion, yielding few prisoners to the enemy, and gallantly defending position after position. During the fighting round Warsaw, General



killed and twice that number wounded. With the capitulation of Warsaw the fighting was officially over. Marshal Smigly-Rydz, the Polish Commander-in-Chief and disciple of Pilsudski, was interned, and the Gestapo began a ruthless reign of terror in the ravaged country. Wholesale executions, diabolical cruelties in concentration camps, and a régime of major tyrannies and minor insults ensued. Whole villages were burned, and the male population of others deliberately decimated—one man in every ten shot—for alleged sabotage or other hostile acts against the invaders. But the patriotism of the Polish people still burns with a steadfast flame.

## CHAPTER II

NORWAY OVERRUN  
APRIL 1940

**B**OTH France and Britain were pledged to the support of Poland. Consequently, Hitler's unprovoked attack on that country brought them both to war with Germany. France mobilized her armies and Britain once again sent an Expeditionary Force across the Channel. The latter, commanded by Viscount Gort, V.C., was under the orders of General Gamelin, the French Commander-in-Chief. While Germany's mechanized juggernaut was pulverizing Poland, however, the only overt action taken by France or Britain by land or sea was the distribution by the R.A.F. over Germany of a few million leaflets, and a cautious nibble by the French Army under General Georges which made a salient over the German frontier north of Sierck. This intrusion was quickly flattened out by the Germans.

Beyond the sea blockade established by the British and French Fleets this was the only support—other than moral—that the Franco-British Allies extended to Poland while Hitler was savaging that country. All suggestions from London or Paris

and Poland might become a menace to the Soviet Union's security. But Warsaw held out bravely and stoutly till 27th September, when half the city was destroyed and 170,000 of its inhabitants had been killed. The Polish Government, meanwhile, removed first to Roumania, was then reconstructed in Paris, and eventually moved to London, where it continues to organize resistance to the aggressors. The Germans gave their casualties in the fighting as 11,000 killed and 30,000 wounded. The Polish estimate, however, is 500,000 Germans



6. FINAL PARTITION OF POLAND 30th SEPTEMBER, 1939  
*Germany obtains industrial areas and coal, Russia the agricultural and oil area.*

humour this proclamation stated that Mr. Churchill was "the greatest warmonger of the century," and that Great Britain regarded international treaties as "scraps of paper."

It was this invasion of Norway that elicited from the then British Prime Minister, Mr. Neville Chamberlain, his memorable statement that Hitler had "missed the bus."

Public opinion in France and Britain, grievously depressed by the lamentable failure of both Governments to react to the rape of Czechoslovakia and the martyrdom of Poland, was greatly heartened by the announcement that a strong expeditionary force was being sent to defend Norway. Apart from small naval contingents, this powerful force ultimately consisted of a battalion of the famous French Foreign Legion and about 12,000 British troops, the majority of whom were comparatively raw Territorials.

Meanwhile the Royal Navy, as usual, had stepped gallantly into the breach. Undeterred by the knowledge that he was attacking, under unfavourable conditions, a force of German destroyers superior to his own, both numerically and in weight of gun-power, Captain B. A. Warburton-Lee, on the *Hardy*, steamed into the fjord leading to Narvik with four other British destroyers, and fought a desperate point-blank action almost at pistol range.

Our warships sank six armed enemy merchantmen, blew up a munition ship, and sank or crippled four out of six or seven German destroyers.

But the *Hardy* was badly shot about, and had to be grounded. Her gallant Commander, who had received a mortal wound, died shortly after the survivors of his crew floated him ashore on a raft. The first Victoria Cross of this War was awarded posthumously to Captain Warburton-Lee. In addition to the grounding of the *Hardy*, another of our destroyers was sunk; and the others withdrew, more or less badly damaged. But a day or two later H.M.S. *Warspite*, mounting 15-inch guns, with nine destroyers, settled accounts in the same Narvik waters with the German naval forces. On this occasion seven German destroyers as well as shore batteries were knocked out by the *Warspite* and her destroyer flotilla. An armed guard

to neutral States for concerted defence plans or precautionary staff consultations were rejected. The States concerned were too much overawed by the obvious formidable might of the German war machine, and too little impressed either by the promptitude or power of the Franco-British Allies. The winter 1939-40 passed with a feeling of stalemate on the Western front, but on 9th April, 1940, German mechanized divisions abruptly invaded Denmark, some by way of the frontier and others transported by sea. Except for a slight scuffle in which Danish troops sustained a few dozen casualties the invaders encountered nothing more serious than a protest by the King and his Prime Minister. It is perhaps superfluous to note that less than twelve months before this event Hitler had signed a ten-years' peace pact with the Danes.

On the same day the Germans attacked Norway, but here they encountered a King, Government and people of finer mettle. The sudden treacherous assault was greatly assisted, however, by a Norwegian Nazi group headed by Major Vidkun Quisling. This traitor's name has immortalized itself in the dictionary of dishonour. As a byword of apostasy it bids fair to rival that of Judas. The small Norwegian Navy and shore batteries in Oslo Fjord, though taken by surprise, resisted pluckily, and inflicted considerable casualties and damage on the invaders, sinking a German warship and some transports. Under various disguises, and sometimes camouflaged as tourists on neutral ships, German troops landed at Oslo and at different points up the coast. The capital was taken practically without resistance. At Oslo the roar of Luftwaffe engines overhead mingled with the strains of a German military band performing on the quay.

A few Norwegian officers and less than a hundred men in a fort near Trondheim held out gallantly for almost a month. Von Falkenhorst, who was in command of the German operations, issued a proclamation to the Danes and Norwegians, putting forth as a pretext for this outrageous invasion that these countries were being taken over merely to protect them from Great Britain. With a genuine touch of unconscious

was also landed, which not only rescued the *Hardy* survivors, but captured 120 Germans.

Owing to the suddenness of the attack on their country it is doubtful whether more than 2,000 of Norway's Army of 200,000 were ever successfully mobilized. With nothing more than their rifles and machine-guns, they put up an astonishingly stout fight against the German forces advancing from the south. But they looked for help from overseas.

Following small naval landings, British troops, accompanied by some French, were disembarked at Namsos some hundred miles north of Trondheim, under Major-General Carton de Wiart, V.C.; and at Aandalsnes, about the same distance south of Trondheim, under Major-General Bernard Paget.

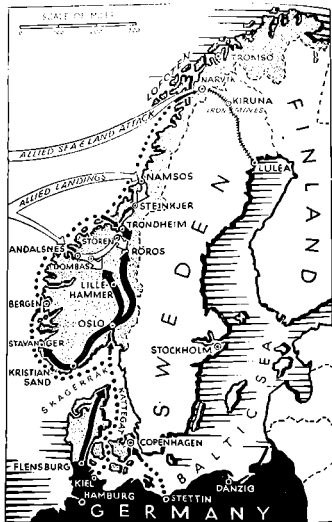
In view of the now known facts, optimistic statements made in Parliament about the strength and equipment of these expeditionary forces must be regarded as unfortunately misleading. The troops had no mechanized equipment, practically no anti-aircraft defence, and even with the most gallant exertions on the part of the R.A.F., who tried to turn a frozen lake into an aerodrome, hardly any air support.

There was some stiff fighting at Trondheim, Lillehammer, Dombaas, and Steinkjer, in which our men encountered strong enemy forces supported by artillery and dive-bombers. The attempt to capture Trondheim by combined operations by our forces north and south failed completely. Our troops, advancing from Namsos, were enfiladed by German destroyer fire from the coast, strongly attacked, and driven back to Steinkjer.

The Aandalsnes force, after reaching Dombaas, and joining up with Norwegian troops at Lillehammer, fought a series of skilful and stubborn rearguard actions which caused heavy casualties to an enemy advancing with far superior numbers and equipment. Eventually, at the end of April, the forces in Central Norway had to be re-embarked. The Narvik force was withdrawn about a month later.

These re-embarkations were successfully conducted under the most difficult conditions, thanks to the devoted, and, as always, the efficient work of the Royal Navy.

German bombers attacked the escorting warships with



7. THE WAR IN NORWAY

view the ensuing operations were a model of up-to-date total war. Belated Dutch efforts to flood the country by the traditional method of breaking down the dykes failed to hinder the German mechanized columns. Vital bridges were secured by trickery. In one instance a party of German soldiers in Dutch uniforms marched quietly across to overpower the Dutch guard.

The Luftwaffe, as usual, acted in close co-operation with the ground troops, and ruthlessly bombed important Dutch cities, more particularly Rotterdam. At the same time, German parachutists came showering down on vital centres. Many of these parachutists took cover in private houses, forcing the civilian inhabitants to afford them shelter, and seizing the women as hostages against attack by any Dutch troops.

Some of the fiercest of the Rotterdam fighting took place on the Waalhaven aerodrome, which was quickly seized by German air-borne troops. Desperate efforts were made to dislodge the latter, but they were constantly reinforced by air. Their equipment comprised Tommy-guns, hand grenades, entrenching tools, radios, and collapsible bicycles. The dropping of fresh supplies of ammunition by parachute was a methodical feature of the Hun invasion plan. Moreover, though reports are somewhat confused, it seems certain that the Germans used gliders for the first time in their attack on Holland.

These air-borne troops—the parachutists, and the soldiers landed by troop planes—were assisted in some cases by other units who had been concealed in canal barges. Fifth columnists, too, played no unimportant part. German residents of hitherto unimpeachable respectability suddenly started firing on the Dutch from behind the shutters of their houses. The Dutch soldiers, fighting under every disastrous disadvantage of surprise and confusion, put up a stout defence worthy of their military tradition. But an ill-equipped army of 600,000 men had no chance against Hitler's perfectly accoutred legions. There was a repetition of the piteous scenes enacted in Poland. Dutch refugees, tramping on foot along the roads from their stricken cities, were savagely bombed and machine-gunned.

venomous fury. The aircraft-carrier *Glorious* and several destroyers and other vessels were lost, as well as the cruiser *Effingham*, which struck an uncharted rock; but the German bombers never succeeded in getting past our naval barrage to attack the troopships.

The Norwegians formally laid down their arms at midnight on 9th June, though their government withdrew to London. It was not Hitler who had "missed the bus."

### CHAPTER III

#### TRAGEDY OF HOLLAND 10TH-14TH MAY, 1940

NOWHERE were Hitler's two basic principles of division and terrorism more impressively illustrated than in the Low Countries. Holland and Belgium firmly rejected all friendly suggestions for mutual defence plans. They were determined to give Hitler no excuse for picking a quarrel and invading their homesteads. As well might a Bank directorate endeavour to avoid giving burglars a pretext for rifling their safes by refusing to lock them. By the simple artifice of protesting that each country he seized would be the last, and solemnly signing, with the others, treaties of non-aggression which he had long ago declared only fools would trust, Hitler was able to devour his victims one by one.

Formidable German troop concentrations along the Dutch frontier early in 1940 forced the Dutch Government to take certain precautions. Against the majestic weight of the German war-machine these precautions were negligible. Before dawn on 10th May the field-grey legions invaded Holland, Belgium and Luxemburg by land and air. Hitler issued a message to his troops telling them that on their efforts depended the destiny of the German people for a thousand years! and assuring them of his blessing. From the German point of



days; and by the end of the month, in the ancient Hall of the Knights at the Hague, Doctor Seyss-Inquart, the sly betrayer of Chancellor Schuschnigg of Austria, was proclaimed German Commissioner of Occupied Holland.

The historic Duchy of Luxemburg, a harmless sort of Ruritanian relic with a show-piece army of 400 soldiers, all with nice uniforms and polished rifles, resisted any comic impulse to oppose its strength against Germany's majestic up-to-date war machine. It did not thereby entirely elude the congenial and ruthless bestiality of the Huns.

Belgium's story belongs to the next chapter, except to mention that the German legions clanked and rumbled into King Leopold's country through Maastricht across a convenient bridge. The number of crucial bridges left intact and available to Hitler's invading forces—instances occurred in Holland, in France, and in Belgium—suggests either extraordinary carelessness on the part of the defenders, or, what is perhaps much more probable, superlative staff work and liaison by Germany's secret hordes of Fifth Columnists. The latter is a new fangled euphemism for the older and cruder word—*traitors*.

#### CHAPTER IV

### DEBACLE AND MIRACLE: THE FALL OF BELGIUM AND FRANCE 10TH MAY–22ND JUNE, 1940

#### § *The Battle of Belgium and the Break Through* 10th–28th May, 1940

WHILST Hitler was pursuing his smash-and-grab rake's progress on the European Continent, events of vital moment were being staged in London. After the Narvik episode Mr. Chamberlain, bowing to a profound popular sense of inadequacy, on 10th May resigned the Premiership. Virtually by popular acclamation, the task of guiding our

The German High Command had issued express orders to this end.

Before making a hazardous escape on a British destroyer to London from the Hook, which was defended for a time by a few British Royal Marines, the Queen of Holland issued "a flaming protest" against Germany's atrocious perfidy; and the Dutch Government anathematized the invaders for advancing under cover of Dutch prisoners—women and children—who were driven before them like helpless sheep.

General Winkelman, who succeeded General Reynders as Dutch Commander-in-Chief a month or two before the invasion, ordered a general surrender on 14th May, in order to spare the civil population further useless casualties. This crucial decision followed within three days of an earlier communiqué optimistically apprising the situation as sound, and commenting on Germany's error in holding the Dutch defences too cheaply.

In Rotterdam alone over 30,000 people had been killed, and a much larger number more or less badly injured. An area of the city two miles long and one mile wide was practically pulverized. This was not entirely wanton atrocity, but partly calculated frightfulness, meant to intimidate other potential victims against resistance to the Hun *Herrenvolk*. In addition to civilian casualties, those of the Dutch Army amounted to about 100,000. The small Dutch Air Force fought to a gallant finish. There were no survivors.

Fortunately the Dutch Navy, which had put up a good fight and had done its best where possible to assist the Army, succeeded for the most part in reaching British ports. Two Dutch submarines just off the stocks at Rotterdam, and with no protection against magnetic mines, made their way with incredible pluck and skill through shoals of those diabolical devices. Ships of the British Navy rendered great service at the Dutch ports in clearing away enemy mines and taking off Dutch refugees. Motor torpedo-boats were in action even up the canals of the Zuyder Zee, which heard the roar of battle for the first time since 1578.

Thus Hitler's war machine overwhelmed Holland in four

his reconstituted Ministry at once set about the task of repairing the tragic shortcomings and omissions of almost a generation of wishful thinking. Meanwhile, on the very day on which Churchill became Prime Minister, the German mechanized legions began their thrust through Holland into Belgium, and their attack on France.

This formidable onslaught followed the routine lines with which Germany had experimented carefully during the Spanish civil war and rehearsed efficiently in Poland. Zooming squadrons of Luftwaffe bombed Antwerp, Brussels, and other Belgian towns as well as many important French ones. Behind and under this aerial Armada came a five-pronged drive through Tirlmont, Namur, Dinant, Longwy, and Sedan. In each case the spearhead of the German thrust consisted of tanks escorted by dive-bombers. Next came the motorized infantry divisions in armoured cars with swarms of motor-cyclists. The solid masses of marching German infantry, with artillery support, brought up the rear. The tactical plan was always the same. The tanks were to smash through the defences, the motorized infantry to exploit the breaches created in the opposing lines, and the foot-slogging infantry to consolidate the positions thus seized.

When the blow fell on Belgium, King Leopold, having until then rejected all proposals even for staff consultations in order to agree on some general defence plan, immediately appealed for help. General Gamelin now for the first time, except for the formal nibble already mentioned in the Sierck area, forsook his strategy of masterly inactivity. Under his orders the 1st French Army under General Georges and the British Expeditionary Force under Lord Gort abandoned carefully entrenched positions along the Belgian frontier, on strengthening which they had worked for seven months, and advanced into Belgium. It is significant that the German High Command took no steps to hinder this movement. Incidentally it may be mentioned that, weeks before Hitler invaded the West, Field-Marshal Lord Milne, our former C.I.G.S., addressed a private meeting of M.P.s at Westminster, and then expressed his intense anxiety lest on any pretext our B.E.F. should be

national and Imperial destinies through the grimmest crisis in our history was entrusted to Mr. Winston Churchill, whose persistent warnings of the menace of re-armed Germany had been ignored by two successive Conservative Administrations, and led to our most distinguished living statesman being boycotted by the leaders of his own party.



8. THE GERMAN ATTACK, 10th MAY, 1940

Mr. Chamberlain, together with some of his colleagues of the former appeasement and *laissez-faire* régimes, still remained in the Government formed by Mr. Churchill, but the new Prime Minister strengthened it, and gave it a truly national character, by bringing in several of the Labour leaders. Not long after his resignation Mr. Chamberlain died—and was buried in Westminster Abbey. The new Prime Minister inherited a disastrous legacy of starved national defences, but

vital bridges at Maastricht, one had been blown up by a devoted Belgian officer, who sacrificed himself with the structure; but the other, by one of those fatalities which so persistently favoured Hitler, remained intact. Across this the Germans clattered unhindered.

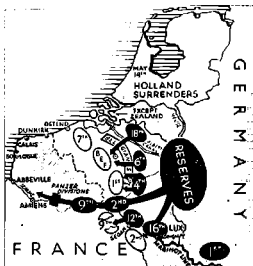
French and British airmen, hopelessly outnumbered, did gallant service in harassing the advancing enemy columns and bombing Meuse bridges. Two British airmen, who never returned from their desperate missions, received Victoria Crosses for destroying one bridge. The French Army on our right, now under General Billotte, who was later killed in a motor smash, was heavily engaged with the oncoming German forces, and our B.E.F. successfully held the enemy's attack on the Louvain sector. But the Germans had found the weak spot. The hilly and wooded country between Namur and Mezières had been considered almost impassable, but the Germans forced their way through without difficulty and seized the Meuse bridges. Here the French 9th Army, under General Corap, nearly fifty per cent short of its infantry cadres and mostly rather raw conscripts none too well officered, was badly mauled. In the ensuing mêlée confusion became worse confounded, and the French Command seems to have lost its grip of a situation in which it was impossible to identify either any sort of front line or even any precise battle front.

Thus began one of the most sensational military débâcles in all history. While Germany had realized the strategic and tactical potentialities of tank-cum-plane warfare, which the British Army was the first to originate, and had reinforced Clausewitz with Al Capone, the French High Command still clung obstinately to the classic theories of St. Cyr and textbook manoeuvres. In a military epoch of mechanized juggernauts and 400-m.p.h. planes, the French still banked on static warfare and an elaborate Maginot Line with undefended northern flank. The German tank divisions took enormous risks. Refilling as they raced along at convenient French petrol stations, they were actually sometimes fifty miles ahead of their nearest supporting troops. They held up French Divisional Generals in their château headquarters with tommy-

## THE WAR UP TO DATE

persuaded to leave its prepared positions in order to go crusading into Belgium.

Our troops, minus adequate anti-tank equipment or our one armoured division still at home, for which Lord Gort had repeatedly made urgent requests, joined up with the Belgians by nightfall on the same day, occupying a position round



### 9. THE BATTLE OF FLANDERS

*First Phase—14th to 17th May, 1940.*

Louvain, with the Belgian Army on its left and the French on its right. The first indication the British G.H.Q. received that real hostilities were about to begin was early that morning, when German planes had dropped bombs round them at Arras. The weight of the German onslaught was formidable. On 11th May the Germans were across the Albert Canal, which had been supposed to be a strong obstacle, and the Belgians were forced to fall back to the right bank of the Meuse. Of two

improvisations. These were successfully carried out, and both we and the French fought favourable local actions. But the main German pincer movement went menacingly on. One arm of the pincers swept via the open corridor along the north side of the Somme through Cambrai, St. Quentin, and Abbeville, turning inwards and north at the coast. The other drove straight past the rear of our abandoned Belgian frontier defences, past Ypres and Dixmude, to the sea, where it turned inwards and south.

This was meant to be an encircling movement as a prelude to the annihilation of the British Army in Belgium. The daunting position of Lord Gort's command was not made any happier by King Leopold's decision, on 28th May, that Belgium must surrender, after his Army had sustained 150,000 casualties, to avoid further useless slaughter. To make things still more awkward, the intimation of this intention was delayed in reaching Lord Gort. Meanwhile Marshal Pétain, a veteran of eighty-four, was made Vice-Premier of France; and Gamelin, whose personality never once seems to have obtruded on the scene, was superseded by General Weygand, recalled from the Near East for that purpose.

#### § *Dunkirk, 29th May-3rd June, 1940*

The position of the Allied troops cut off in the north and fighting against overwhelming numbers was a desperate one. With the British were several divisions of the French 1st Army, who shared their bitter ordeal, and fought with great gallantry in covering the withdrawal. General Ironside, the C.I.G.S. in London, and his successor, General Dill, both in turn flew across for anxious talks with Lord Gort, when it was obvious that the situation was critical, but there was no chance of restoring the Allied front or recovering the military offensive. Plans suggested from London were out of date before they reached Gort's headquarters, while Weygand's appointment as Generalissimo had come too late to achieve anything. He adopted a rough-and-ready plan, long urged by Lord Gort, that there should be a joint effort, by simultaneous attacks

guns, rounded up bodies of distracted French infantry whom they told sardonically to break their weapons and get away home, and spread utter confusion deep behind the French front.

In some cases these German tankmen jocosely offered to sell petrol to stranded French motorists. Almost as demoralizing and perhaps even more dislocating than the German panzer divisions were the panic-stricken civilian refugees who completely blocked all the roads behind the French front-line troops. It was almost impossible to keep in touch with the latter, and quite hopeless to attempt to rush up reinforcements or urgently needed supplies. There is more than hearsay evidence that German parachutists and Fifth Columnists contributed to this civilian *saute qui peut*. The parachutists, armed with automatics and hand grenades, did much damage to important communications deep behind the lines, and Fifth Columnists rang up civic authorities on the 'phone, and in perfect French ordered them immediately to evacuate all their inhabitants. In vain the French High Command desperately tried to grapple with a situation which changed, not from day to day, but from hour to hour and even minute to minute. German panzer troops, driving through Sedan, enlarged the bulge in the French defence line created by the rout of the 9th Army. The bulge quickly became a broken gap, and then an open corridor over thirty miles wide. That corridor separated the French Army in Belgium and the B.E.F. from the main French forces to the south. It also cut the B.E.F.'s supply communications.

Mr. Churchill has expressed the view that, once the enemy broke through between Namur and Mezières, nothing could have saved the situation but a prompt withdrawal south to Amiens. Instead of attempting anything of that sort, which would, however, have meant sacrificing the Belgian Army, the French High Command vainly strove to stop a leak which had become a mechanized Niagara. The surrender of the Dutch Army and the enforced retreat of the Belgians on our left flank, together with the gravely critical situation farther south, where Lord Gort's right flank was in the air, necessitated hasty



The original plan was to re-embark at Boulogne. But the advance of the German panzer divisions up the coast from Abbeville was so rapid that this idea had to be abandoned, and a landing party of Royal Marines and Royal Engineers, with some bluejackets, withdrew after destroying as much of the port facilities and stores as possible before the arrival of the enemy. A similar situation arose at Calais, to the west of Dunkirk, but here a British brigade under Brigadier Claude Nicholson, consisting of three rifle battalions, a tank battalion, an anti-tank battery and a few Royal Marines, was ordered to hold the town at all costs in order to cover the B.E.F.'s embarkations at Dunkirk. This brigade, numbering about 3,000 men, with 800 French troops, withstood a furious attack by tank, plane, artillery, and infantry, outnumbering them by more than ten to one, for four days and nights. One isolated British brigade and a French battalion against two or three German divisions! They fought to a finish. Only a handful of them escaped from the blazing ruins, where the glare of burning oil reservoirs threw a ghastly reflection on the clouds of mephitic smoke that shrouded the shattered town.

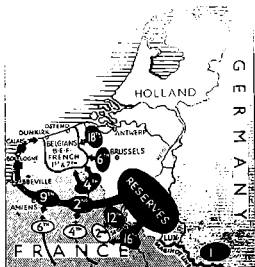
The rest, including Brigadier Nicholson, were either killed or taken prisoners. No feat of arms in the annals of the British Army, which has more than once shown that it can "finish in style," has a more epic ring than the last stand of the 30th Brigade at Calais. It effected its purpose. But for the forlorn hope of Calais, it would have been impossible to embark over 300,000 British and French troops from the Dunkirk beaches.

The spirit of the defenders of Calais may be gauged from two incidents out of many. At the height of the German onslaught, whilst bombs and shells and machine-gun bullets streamed on the doomed citadel, one company of Rifles held an improvised smoking concert, interrupted by turning out to repel a tank attack. A battalion runner, speeding with an urgent message through crashing streets, was held up by a British Red Cap, who took his name and number for being without his respirator.

Meanwhile, fighting desperately on two flanks, Lord Gort's

## THE WAR UP TO DATE

from north and south, to close the gap in the defence line. A very determined and efficient effort was made on our part from the north, which reached all objectives; but the French troops on the south were not ready to co-operate, and the effort was wasted. Later Weyand ordered another co-operative movement with the same object, but by the time the plan



### 10. THE BATTLE OF FLANDERS

*Second Phase—18th to 23rd May, 1940.*

was formulated it was out of date and impracticable owing to the constant changes in the position due to the disconcerting rapidity of the German advance. Finally it was recognized that nothing remained but to endeavour to re-embark as many of our troops, minus all their heavier equipment and stores, as could possibly be rescued by sea. When it became known that the German panzer divisions, tearing along from the south, had occupied Boulogne, Dunkirk remained the last hope.

soldier or the unfailing resilience and resource of the Royal Navy.

Our men in khaki battledress queued-up on the Dunkirk beaches as though they were waiting at bus stops. There they patiently stood, under direct artillery as well as machine-gun fire and constantly bombed from the air, whilst every available ship of the Royal Navy that could be brought into the shallow waters of Dunkirk was loaded up with troops snatched literally from the jaws of death.

More than this, in answer to a call for volunteers, hundreds of other vessels, a whole sublimely crazy Armada of Saucy Sallies, undaunted by enemy mines and planes, headed from England for the Dunkirk beaches. Tugs, yachts, barges, trawlers, motor-boats, pleasure steamers, fire-brigade launches, even lifeboats, manned by eager crews of professional and amateur seamen, swarmed over the Channel to lend a hand in the miracle that actually brought away over 200,000 British and 100,000 French troops, besides 13,053 of our battle casualties.

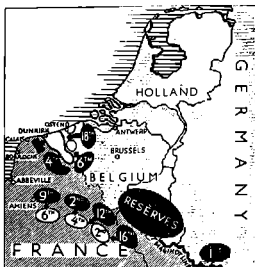
Those who shared this gallant work of salvaging an army reported that not a soldier attempted to jump a comrade's place in the queues, and that the men who just missed being embarked, and were left to await the problematical next trip, usually seasoned their good-luck farewells to the departing boatloads with some typical army jest. The B.E.F. kept its fighting morale, and its unquenchable British humour, to the last.

### *§ The Battle of France: 5th-22nd June, 1940*

The actual evacuation from Dunkirk had occupied no more than six days (29th May-3rd June), and while it was going on the German attention was fully engaged in trying to destroy the trapped armies. Thus Weygand had a short breathing space to reorganize and form a new line along the Somme and eastward to the Maginot Line at Montmedy. Here he awaited the enemy attack. It came with violent force at dawn on 5th June, and in less than three weeks the "Battle of France" was over, and the French Republic had signed an armistice

## THE WAR UP TO DATE

B.E.F.—minus the 51st Highland Division, which had been detached for service with a French Army and was finally overwhelmed after a grim fight at St. Valéry en Caux—was withdrawing, with associated French troops, within a gradually diminishing perimeter based on Dunkirk. Earlier in the



### II. THE BATTLE OF FLANDERS

*Last Phase—Belgium capitulates, 28th May, 1940.*

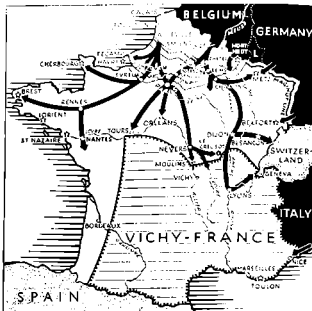
débâcle it had fought a successful engagement with the oncoming Germans at Arras, where the Welsh Guards put up a magnificent covering action. Lord Gort has testified to the fine fighting spirit displayed even by some battalions of partly trained young soldiers. The desperation of the situation was such that the Germans confidently announced the annihilation of the entire B.E.F. But the enemy boasted without reckoning either on the grim tight-corner morale of the British

with their age-long enemy. The situation was made still more desperate by the Italian declaration of war on 10th June. The breakdown was sudden and disastrous. The decision of the French Government not to defend Paris, which was occupied by the Germans on 14th June, was an ominous symptom. Mr. Churchill, with Lord Halifax and Lord Beaverbrook, had a hurried conference at Tours with M. Reynaud, and the latter suggested that France should be released from her pledge not to make a separate peace. Naturally the British Prime Minister refused to agree.

The fall of Paris had been preceded by heavy German attacks on the Amiens-Peronne-Soissons sector, and also by a German movement turning the almost unprotected northern end of the famous Maginot Line, which proved, as one distinguished soldier had prophesied, "the gravestone of France." Mr. Churchill was actually seated in the train at Victoria Station, London, on his way to another urgent conference with M. Reynaud, when news reached him that Marshal Pétain had taken supreme charge in France, and asked the Germans to grant an armistice.

France had been conquered by practically 150,000 German panzer troops in about twenty-one days. Despite an unprecedented offer by the British Government of a common citizenship between France and the British Commonwealth, the controlling spirits of the once illustrious French Republic declined to continue the struggle from French Northern Africa. Marshal Pétain, historic defender of Verdun and author of the immortal defiance *Ils ne passeront pas*, signed the surrender of France in the identical railway coach, in the woods near Rethondes in Compiègne, in which Marshal Foch received the abject German peace emissaries on 11th November, 1918.

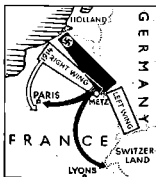
Illuminating comments on the military collapse of France have been made by a distinguished British soldier who acted as liaison officer during the débâcle. He several times joined personally and actively in the mêlée behind the lines, and stated that in many cases the German panzer troops, lost and bewildered miles ahead of any supports, could have been easily



12. DEFEAT OF FRANCE—JUNE 1940

### 13. THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN

Showing the modification of the Schlieffen Plan of 1914 in 1940. In 1914 the northern (right) wing was swung round and south to envelop Paris from the west. This was defeated at the Battle of the Marne. The black block, marked with a swastika, shows the modification in 1940. In this case the main reserves were held at the centre and near the pivot. The breakthrough was thus on the southern half and enveloped the allied armies from the north and east, at the same time moving southerly to the Swiss frontier thus outflanking the Maginot Line.



## WINGED ARMADA: THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

enrolled as a Home Guard for the defence of Britain's hearths and homes. There is no parallel in history to this heartening rally by the over-age and under-age manhood of this country.

Inspiring as this manifestation was, it is perhaps fortunate for us that it was not at that moment put to the ruthless test of battle. Hitler's plans had prospered beyond his ambitious hopes. France, once the most puissant military Power in Europe, had been overrun in three weeks. The next step was to knock out Britain, and Hitler's Army chiefs felt fairly confident of achieving this, and ending the war victoriously by the autumn or at latest the winter of 1940. They reckoned on neutralizing our naval supremacy by overwhelming air power, and, after the Luftwaffe had mastered our small R.A.F., as it had done the air forces of Poland and France, on combining formidable troop landings by air with coastal landings for which the Luftwaffe would command a bridgehead.

But the first step, essential preliminary to what would follow, was to secure air supremacy over this island. Until then the Luftwaffe's activities against us had been confined to spasmodic bombing or machine-gunning of coastal places by a few stray planes, together with occasional attacks on unarmed trawlers and peaceful lighthouses. Fairly early in the war some of our R.A.F. auxiliary pilots, lawyers and business men who had trained as airmen in their week-ends, had the novel and exhilarating experience of chasing one German plane in a hedge-hopping tally-ho over the roofs of Edinburgh. They did not fail to get their bird. But on 8th August Goering, chief of the German Luftwaffe, gave the order to attack Britain in deadly earnest.

Then ensued what has been rightly called the Battle of Britain. It was a battle fought under unique conditions, and on the outcome hung the fate of Britain and the destiny of the British Empire. Had the R.A.F. proved unequal to a conflict in which the odds were anything up to thirty-to-one against them, only exceptional optimism could believe, with the calamitously inadequate military resources then at our disposal, we could have confidently resisted the full impact of the seasoned and tempered German war machine. At the very

rounded up had there been any well-organized counter-action. It would have been almost a police affair, declared this eyewitness. He finally reached Weygand's headquarters with the intention of urging these facts on Gamelin's successor as Generalissimo. He found the latter seated at a table, his head sunk in his hands, in a state of apparent collapse. One of Weygand's staff subordinates, on being told the British officer's errand, begged him "to report in writing"! Apparently the military genius of Foch's old Chief of Staff derived its inspiration from the personal contact of his Commander. Weygand without Foch was not Weygand.

## CHAPTER V

# WINGED ARMADA: THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN 8TH AUGUST-31ST OCTOBER, 1940

**I**N the summer of 1940 Britain stood in greater peril than this historic island had done for nine hundred years. France had collapsed: our Expeditionary Force had lost all its heavy equipment in the débâcle, and Germany's mechanized war machine, the most formidable instrument of military aggression ever forged, stood to attention at the Channel ports. At that date we had here at home a million or two of partially trained troops, perhaps, but actually only one army division adequately accoutred for modern war.

Germany's invasion plans were naked and undisguised. Hitler accumulated thousands of motorized barges along the German-occupied coasts fronting Britain, assembled hundreds of troop-carrier planes and gliders, some of the latter capable of transporting small tanks, and mounted big-gun batteries commanding the narrowest Channel crossing. It was in this desperate situation that, at the pure call of patriotism, a million and three-quarter volunteers—a large proportion of them ex-service veterans of the 1914-18 war—within six weeks



any enemy planes that broke away or through our defences. By 18th August Goering had to mourn the loss of 697 of his war-planes definitely known to have been shot down. A high percentage of the rest must have been too badly winged by our formidable Spitfire and Hurricane broadsides ever to reach home again. Our losses were 153 planes, with 60 of the pilots safe. Still the Luftwaffe persevered with their attacks. They knew that Hitler's whole grand invasion programme depended on their success. They tried trick after trick in their endeavour to draw off our fighters by feint attacks, and thus enable their bombers to reach their objectives, and repeat in England the tragic holocausts of Warsaw and Rotterdam.

As the battle wore on, and the German Luftwaffe ranks were thinner, they tried attacking on a broader front, and gradually increased the fighter escorts. Between 24th August and 5th September the Germans delivered thirty-five major daylight attacks. Their bombers now flew boxed round by fighters as well as screened by massed fighters above. On 30th August eight hundred German planes made a desperate onslaught on our southern and eastern aerodromes. They aimed to destroy the nesting places of our young eagles. In this second phase of the battle the Germans lost for certain 562 planes. The R.A.F. lost 219 planes, but 132 pilots were saved. The strain involved on our numerically weaker R.A.F. cadres may be imagined from the fact that from 8th August to 5th September the R.A.F. furnished no fewer than 4,523 fighter patrols. Just about an average of one hundred and fifty-six a day.

Towards the close of the second phase of the battle we had changed our tactical dispositions to enable us to meet the enemy in greater strength and farther away from their objectives. We also strengthened the rearguard screen which had the exacting task of shooting down any swastika birds that managed to elude or break through our advance cordons. The third phase of the battle, which lasted from 6th September to 5th October, found the Germans switching their attack over to industrial targets, with London itself as the main one. The Luftwaffe came roaring over, between the dates just indicated,

best it must have been, as the Iron Duke said afterwards of Waterloo, "a devilish close thing." It was the dauntless manner in which the R.A.F. literally rose to this tremendous occasion that drew from the Prime Minister the memorable tribute: "Never before in recorded history have so many owed so much to so few."

The Battle of Britain raged almost incessantly from 8th August till the 31st October. It was fought over a wide area of South England, day after day, at a height of sometimes four, five, or six miles above the earth. The majority of the inhabitants of this populous island, to whose lives and fortunes it meant so much, were hardly aware of the titanic struggle staged in the skies over their tranquil roofs. In a series of furious dog-fights, as massed air squadrons encountered each other and broke formation to wage desperate individual air duels, the battle ranged above the smiling meadows and rolling pastures of Surrey, Kent, Essex, Sussex, Hampshire and Dorset. All the civilians below heard was the reverberation of distant machine-gun fire overhead amongst the clouds or echoing from clear blue summer skies.

At times they may have caught sight of tiny sparkling dots, glinting like sword-points, manoeuvring in the ether, and leaving behind them across the heavens a sinister trail of white exhaust vapour. Occasionally there would sound, however, a hideous crescendo shriek, followed by a ground-quaking crash, as some smitten aerial war-chariot hurtled bullet-shattered to earth. The Germans encountered a far more effective and deadly defence than they had ever bargained for. In the opening phase of the battle, between 8th and 18th August, they came over in massed formations of bombers with their fighter escorts similarly massed from 5,000 to 10,000 feet above them. Between the dates just named the R.A.F. stood up to twenty-six such attacks, which were chiefly directed at that time against shipping convoys off our coast and our ports.

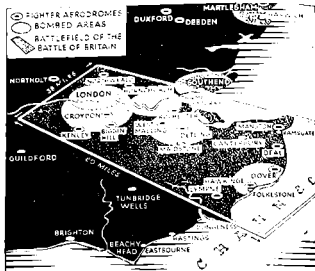
We had a perfect tactical plan, which was adjusted from time to time as the Germans changed their tactics. Certain of our squadrons tackled the fighter escorts whilst others attacked the bombers, and vigilant rearguard squadrons mopped up

knights-errant. Each time the German massed squadrons came, the R.A.F., staunch and efficient as tempered steel in the hands of a master swordsman, kept its cyrie tryst with the invading fogmen. The latter grew less and less enthusiastic at the prospect of meeting our youngsters gun to gun.

On 7th September Goering ordered a special effort to knock out London, the capital he had threatened to make a "shambles." Three hundred and fifty German bombers and fighters, flying in two waves east of Croydon, managed to reach the Thames estuary. Though they were promptly encountered over Kent and Surrey, a number managed to dodge through, some even reaching almost as far as Cambridge. That memorable day Londoners witnessed terrific aerial dog-fights over the City and St. Paul's. Extensive damage was done, chiefly by incendiary bombs, to London's East End dockland. Many riverside factories were ablaze. Railway communications and gas and electric supply plants were badly deranged. But these successes, which never had more than a nuisance value, cost the Luftwaffe 103 aircraft. Four days later some thirty German planes reached Central London. They were so badly mauled by our fighters that at least 250 German airmen perished.

On 12th September a solitary German bomber, dodging between clouds, managed to drop a bomb on Buckingham Palace. As the grand finale of the third phase of the Battle of Britain 500 German planes, half of them in the morning and half in the afternoon, swarmed across the Channel, and were engaged by our Spitfires and Hurricanes in a dramatic running fight that extended from Hammersmith to Dungeness and from Stepney to Dieppe. In this particular fight the Germans lost 185 planes, and Goering's casualties between 6th September and 5th October totalled 883 planes. This third phase included fifteen attacks on London. In all this desperate battling in the central blue, the brunt of the fighting was borne by No. 11 Group of Fighter Command, reinforced occasionally, especially during the heavy attacks on London, by Groups 10 and 12. Between 11th September and 5th October, 442 enemy planes fell to Group 11 alone. This record was achieved

## THE WAR UP TO DATE



14. THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

thirty-eight times on major attacks. Our Spitfire and Hurricane gallants met them, usually over the area between Edenbridge and Tunbridge Wells.

Innumerable duels to the death were fought over the hop-fields of Kent, and the summer skies were constantly humming with the staccato tack-tack of machine-gun salvos. From some ancient castle keeps in the heart of Southern England, whence watchers four centuries earlier saw the Armada beacons blaze across the land, observers in the summer of 1940 saw occasional showers of parachutes showing lily-white against the blue sky. The pleasant meads of our green land were thickly strewn with the shattered hulks of Goering's swastika squadrons. The invincible Luftwaffe, which had pounded Poland, Norway, the Netherlands, and fair France into subjection, had met more than their match in our R.A.F.

THE BOMBER ON THE HEARTH  
WINTER 1940-41

THE Battle of Britain gave the German Luftwaffe more than it could stomach of our R.A.F.'s fighting qualities. Accordingly, having abandoned the attempt to gain daylight air supremacy over Britain as a preliminary to an actual invasion, Hitler next resorted to sustained and intensive night bombing raids. Though London was the chief and most persistent target, all our great seaport and inland industrial cities came in for a share of this truly Hunnish savagery. Right through the late summer, autumn, and winter of 1940-41 these night attacks were maintained on an ambitious scale. Hundreds of enemy bombers were zooming overhead in the darkness or the moonlight on most nights. Owing to its immensity London showed the havoc played by enemy bombs and incendiaries less spectacularly than some of the provincial cities where the damage was necessarily more concentrated. Though there are areas of the metropolis, including the City itself, where the admiring tourist can easily receive Pompeiian impressions. Actually in the aggregate London sustained more damage than all the rest of the cities put together.

Deplorable devastation was wrought, however, at Portsmouth, Southampton, Plymouth, Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow, Tyneside, Hull, Manchester, Coventry, Birmingham, and many another quiet English town. Mostly it was peaceful residential suburbs that suffered from these either perfectly indiscriminate or else criminally clumsy night attacks, and, despite public and private garden shelters, the casualty roll of our civilians reached formidable figures. Whole streets were often laid waste, those homes that were not actually reduced to heaps of tangled rubble being blasted into ghastly windowless and doorless shells. If Hitler's object was to destroy our civilian morale, this ruthlessness failed ludicrously to achieve its purpose. The A.R.P. machinery and personnel worked magnificently.

with a loss of 58 pilots—one of ours to every eight Germans. For the fourth and final phase of the Battle of Britain Goering completely changed his tactics again. This time he tried substituting fighters and fighter-bombers for long-range bombers, and the Luftwaffe zoomed over at a height of 30,000 feet.

It served them in no better stead than their earlier tactics. We suited our own formations and tactics to the enemy's new plans, and in three and a half weeks No. 11 Group knocked out 167 enemy planes. Obviously the Luftwaffe was despondent. It was beaten, and it knew it. Our youngsters, as they soared up to join battle, could hear the Germans warning each other over their wireless 'phones— "Achtung! . . . Schpitfeuer!" Often enough, sooner than run the gauntlet of our broadsides, the Germans jettisoned their bombs anyhow. Queer as well as epic things happened. One Hurricane pilot shot down a Dornier. The machine crashed outside Victoria Station. The German crew parachuted down on Kennington Oval, historic battleground of cricket. The pilot of the Hurricane, whose machine went into an uncontrollable spin as the Dornier exploded below it, baled out and landed, nonchalant as a prince, on Chelsea embankment. One morning a Group Captain in a Hurricane, alone with himself, met a large formation of Germans. He dashed at them head-on, and the Germans broke formation and fled incontinently.

From first to last—8th August to 31st October—the R.A.F. in the Battle of Britain shot out of the daylight skies over "this dear England" no fewer than 2,375 German planes. It was a great and glorious victory. But—not counting mere machines—it cost the R.A.F. 375 gallant comrades killed and 358 wounded. The most impressive tribute of all to the prowess of our incomparable R.A.F. is perhaps the fact that, after the first few days, civilians took no heed whatever of the daylight Alert sirens. So utter, so unassailable, was their trust in that devoted "thin blue line."

## THE NELSON TOUCH: THE WAR AT SEA

that broken rhythm of the engines which seemed as though the mechanism was grunting under its load of bombs. Finally the thrilling crescendo whistle of the descending bombs, followed by the ear-splitting detonation of high explosive and the ominous rumble of cascading masonry. As obbligate to all this there were the staccato bursts of machine-guns echoing over respectable London suburbs as our alert A.A. watchers fired at falling enemy flares to put them out. Those were nights when the grim realities of total war were brought vividly home to every citizen, and people who had never regarded themselves as potential heroes were surprised to discover how calmly—with perhaps an occasional tightening of the heart as something really heavy shrieked across their rooftops—they paused hand-in-hand with Destiny. In the later stages of the Luftwaffe's night excursions another and most welcome sound was added to the sinister orchestration of the black-out. The crisp roar of our intrepid night-fighters skimming across the vault of heaven in hot pursuit of the Hun marauders. Nemesis in an oxygen-mask, finger on the broadside button, on the trail of the Hun baby-killer.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE NELSON TOUCH: THE WAR AT SEA

IT was the author of *Obiter Dicta* who pointed out that the insensibilities of politicians are self-centred in their seats. This may explain why the House of Commons allowed Britain to disarm in a Europe bristling with new-forged armaments. M.P.s were scared stiff by the fact that some millions of potential voters appended a solemn negative to the Peace Ballot's naive inquiry: "Are you in favour of war?" The apotheosis of this outlook, of course, may be found in the classic aphorism of a former Prime Minister of England who said: "If I had told the truth, we should have lost the election!"

Firemen, police, wardens, rescue squads, and neighbours all displayed a dour heroism that gave a new lustre to the name "British." There were some heart-rending scenes and episodes, but the suburban front never broke. It stood up to fate and Hitler with bloodshot but unshaken eyes.

Desperately but skilfully labouring in the blackness, or with bombs falling round ruins fiercely lit up by burning buildings, the navvies of the rescue squads performed heroic prodigies of breathless energy. "Tender and tough" is how one experienced official onlooker described them. While his mates plied pick and shovel with might and main, one of the squad would gently stroke the hand of an imprisoned victim with his rough paw. All the rescue men were fine, another authority testified, but a good leader or foreman made a tremendous difference. Possibly there is here a moral for our politicians. British democracy is sound to the core, but it responds best to inspiring leadership. Its reactions to leaders who are perpetually wetting their finger to find out which way the wind blows are apathetic. Considering the magnitude of the German attacks and their long persistence, it is amazing how little serious injury was done to anything that could even loosely be called a military objective. Relatively speaking, Hun frightfulness completely missed its aim. But it steeled the hearts of Britain's civilians to endure to the end.

To the civilian list of those who nobly stood up to their hazardous tasks during the blitz ordeal must be added, though they are not civilians, our devoted A.A. gunners and barrage balloon crews. They stuck to their posts through thick and thin, suffering many casualties, and to their skilful efforts London and other cities owe much more than some of their inhabitants perhaps realize. Without those A.A. guns and the balloons, the position would have been much more formidable even than it was. Londoners of this generation will not readily forget those blitz winter nights. With the curtain of night came monotonously the wail of the alert-sirens. Then usually the dull reverberations of distant gunfire, intensifying as it crept nearer. Then the gimlet-like sound of German bomber planes weaving their lethal way high overhead, with



the men of the Merchant Service and of our tragically neglected fishing fleets shared the honours with their comrades of the Silent Service. When the record is recited of what the seamen of Britain did in this world war, History herself will stand at the salute. Nothing has been heard in the present war of that nitwit parrot-cry of the last one: "What is the Navy doing?"

Without in the least detracting from the deathless laurels of the R.A.F., it may be said that, without the Royal Navy's unceasing and efficient vigil, the Battle of Britain itself would have been not only vain but from the enemy's point of view unnecessary. So fine-drawn was our naval strength in 1940 that there is no saying whether, but for the fifty old destroyers received from U.S.A. in exchange for certain Atlantic naval bases, the Battle of the Atlantic might not have gone against us.

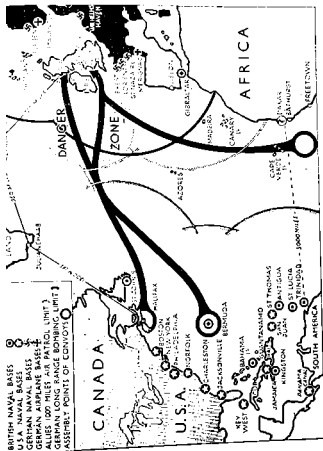
The Royal Navy's well-nigh impossible task was desperately complicated by the collapse of France. Until then the French Fleet had looked after the western half of the Mediterranean and our own after the eastern half. Now we were faced by the grave possibility that Hitler might secure control of France's formidable naval forces. The French Admirals at Oran and Dakar, where strong French squadrons were located, refused our friendly appeal that they should join us in fighting Germany to the death; or, failing that, be interned in either a British or French West Indian port for the war's duration. They also declined a suggestion that their ships should be handed over to U.S.A. custody. Accordingly Vice-Admiral Somerville regretfully informed the French Admiral at Oran that he must sink his own ships within six hours, or the British Fleet had orders to take any necessary action to prevent their falling into enemy hands.

The French Admiral elected to fight, and a brief naval action ensued between Fleets that until then had been gallant comrades-in-arms. The French had the support of their land batteries, but, without important damage to our ships, most of the French squadron was put out of action. The Fleet Air Arm hit the battleship *Dunkerque* six times with torpedoes; another battleship, the *Bretagne*, was sunk; and another, the *Provence*, heavily damaged. The battleship *Strasbourg*, winged

One grim result of this abject folly was that, when the gathering German storm finally burst over Europe, Britain's "sure shield," the Royal Navy, was not much more than the shadow of its 1914 fighting weight. The disparity between 1914 and 1939, moreover, was most pronounced in destroyers, the one type of warship essential against submarine attacks, in which Germany was known to specialize, and in preparation for which we had, under the Naval Pact made by the Baldwin Ministry, chivalrously gone out of our way to allow the Germans a larger proportion of keels. It is necessary to explain these facts to enable the full realization of the incredible resilience and devotion shown by the Royal Navy in this war.

In 1914-18 our seamen had as Allies the navies of France, Japan, Italy, Russia and U.S.A. Five of the major naval forces afloat on the Seven Seas. In the present war, after the quick collapse of France and until U.S.A. came actively into the arena, the British Navy stood alone, shouldering with a cheery heave-ho the whole burden of policing every ocean where the Red Rag of Britain's merchantmen flew above blue water, escorting assorted menageries of troop transports and cargo boats, hunting down U-boat packs, patrolling for enemy commerce-raiders, sweeping-up every variety of enemy mine, guarding our island coasts from the ever-present menace of invasion, salvaging B.E.F.s from all emergencies, and watching the air as well as the sea. In the last war, with five allied navies to help, there was no air threat to sea power. This time, without such backing, there is a very real one.

It was a tall order, especially with the limited resources at the Admiralty's command; but, as so often in our rough and somewhat haphazard island story, the devotion and lives of our fighting men made good the deficiencies of our seat-conscious politicians. How they did it even the Royal Navy can scarcely tell. We talk of the miracle of Dunkirk—in which, as in Norway and Crete, the Royal Navy played the leading role—but here is a day-to-day and night-to-night miracle, not intermittent but continual, year in, year out, in all kinds of weather and under all sorts of conditions. Let it be added that in all these heart-testing fatigues and hazards



by a torpedo, managed to reach Teulon. Similar terms were offered to the French Admiral at Dakar, where much later General de Gaulle made an abortive attempt to land under cover of a British naval force; but again they were rejected, and Lieut.-Commander R. N. Bristowe thereon made a daring entry into the harbour over the defence booms in a motor-boat, and dropped a depth charge under the port quarter of the *Richelieu*, at that time said to be the most powerful battleship afloat. The Fleet Air Arm also attacked her with torpedoes, and she was heavily listed and let down by the stern. At Alexandria the French Admiral consented to demilitarize his ships. As a sequel to these imperative operations the Vichy Ministry broke off relations with us.

An additional severe handicap to the Royal Navy was the refusal of Eire, for whom President de Valera claimed neutrality in the war, to permit the use of Irish ports which would have been of immense assistance to our Atlantic patrols by sea and air. The loss of the French Navy's co-operation, except for those units which came over to General de Gaulle and fought gallantly for Free France, not only jeopardized our naval control in the western Mediterranean but compelled most of our convoys for the Middle East to take the circuitous route round Africa. Meanwhile, whilst we were punctiliously observing the niceties of international sea law, the Germans were embarking on ruthless naval frightfulness. It was the old policy of *spurlos versunken* from the first. Neutral vessels as well as ours were sunk on sight, and on the first day of war a U-boat, which must have been carefully positioned before hostilities were declared, torpedoed the liner *Athenia* off the west coast of Ireland with the loss of 112 lives.

Amongst other outlawed devices the Germans scattered magnetic mines indiscriminately. These were popularly regarded as Hitler's boasted "secret weapon," but actually the magnetic mine was no new idea. It was used, within legalized limits, in the last war. Our scientists soon countered this diabolical weapon, however, by the simple process of demagnetizing our vessels with an electric girdle. German merchant ships trying to reach home ports, when challenged by our naval

attack on Poland brought our declaration of war. Her mission was to act as commerce-raider, and she left a trail of sunken merchantmen from the Indian Ocean to the South Atlantic. Flying his pennant on the *Ajax*, and accompanied by two other light cruisers, the *Exeter* and *Achilles*, all of six-inch-gun armament, Commodore Harwood, on 13th December, 1939, sighted the German well outside Montevideo. He had actually rehearsed the battle tactics on the previous day with his captains. It was a desperately gallant venture, for the *Graf Spee's* eleven-inch batteries hopelessly outranged and outweighed the combined fire of the British cruisers.

To realize how desperate were the battle odds it is necessary only to recall how at the Battle of the Falkland Islands in the last war one British battle-cruiser turned the balance decisively against much more powerful German warships than Commodore Harwood commanded. His plan of action was brilliantly conceived, however, and by attacking the *Graf Spee* from three widely distant angles he forced her to divide her attentions. At the same time, reckless of the enemy's big guns, the British cruisers used their superior speed to close action to suit their six-inch guns. The *Graf Spee* concentrated her big guns mainly on the *Exeter*, and that gallant ship, terribly mauled by eleven-inch salvoes, finally had to fall out with every gun-turret disabled. But the *Ajax* and *Achilles* stuck to the German, pounding her with steady gunnery, so that towards dusk of a running fight that began early in the morning the German tried to get away under cover of a smoke-screen. The *Graf Spee* reached Montevideo with twenty-seven holes in her hull besides much disarrangement of her top hamper. The limping *Exeter* made for the Falkland Islands to nurse her wounds, and the *Cumberland*, a sister ship, joined the indomitable *Ajax* and *Achilles* off the port. The British bulldogs waited in vain for the German pocket-battleship—claimed by her designers to be too fast to be caught by anything she could not blow out of the water—to come out after being patched up and renew the fight. Her captain, who later shot himself, tried to persuade his crew to fight the ship, but they had no stomach for any more of the Nelson touch, and refused.

patrols, adopted a policy of scuttle, trusting to British humanity to rescue their crews. In contrast with which, when our vessels were torpedoed, German U-boats frequently machine-gunned their crews in the boats.

In the arduous and anxious task of escorting merchant convoys the Royal Navy received splendid assistance from the R.A.F.'s indomitable Coastal Command, which in the first six months of war covered about five million miles whilst shepherding over seven hundred convoys. Owing to lack of adequate cruiser strength we had to press into convoy and patrol service converted liners as armed auxiliaries. Even the Royal Navy's sea epic has no brighter page than the record of these dauntless auxiliaries. Never hesitating to sacrifice themselves in order to save their convoy flocks, a number of these gallant improvised cruisers were lost. The P. & O. liner *Rawalpindi*, pitting her eggshell hull and six-inch pop-guns against the heavily armoured German pocket-battleship *Deutschland*, with her eleven-inch batteries, fought to a finish, and went down aflame, her gunners firing to the last, with her tattered ensign still proudly defiant. Captain Fogarty Fegen, of the auxiliary *Jervis Bay*, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. He deliberately engaged an unidentified German pocket-battleship which attacked his convoy; and, though hopelessly outweighed, fought for an hour, his ship ablaze and shot to twisted ruins, before the stricken *Jervis Bay* plunged beneath the waves. Her guns were still firing when her deck was awash. This heroic sacrifice enabled thirty out of a convoy of thirty-five merchantmen to escape.

Early in the War the Royal Navy sustained two nasty knocks. The aircraft-carrier *Courageous* was torpedoed and sunk, and a daring U-boat captain, creeping through defective Scapa Flow defences, plunged several torpedoes into the battleship *Royal Oak* at her moorings. The *Royal Oak* went down with eight hundred officers and men. But by a piece of wizard deduction, based on the S.O.S. from a sinking British steamer, Commodore Harwood, Commander-in-Chief on the West Indies station, guessed the movements of the German pocket-battleship, *Graf Spee*, which left Germany well before Hitler's



Accordingly, on orders from Hitler cabled from Berlin, the *Graf Spee* was taken outside the port inshore, set alight, and ignominiously scuttled. There was a dramatic sequel to this brilliant sea fight. One of the *Graf Spee's* supply ships, with 299 British seamen aboard who had been taken from the raider's victims, was traced to a Norwegian fjord, where the destroyer *Cossack* drew alongside her. Lieut.-Commander B. J. Turner, a well-known Navy rugby player, leapt from the *Cossack* to the *Altmark* deck, followed by a boarding-party of bluejackets. The German crew and armed guard, which much outnumbered our party, were overpowered, and to a rousing shout—"The Navy is here!"—the imprisoned seamen, who had been shockingly treated, were released.

In the Mediterranean the security of the British position had been seriously menaced by the Italian declaration of war and the defection of France that robbed us of the help of a formidable fleet. The Italian fleet, however, pursued a tip-and-run policy. A fact which inspired a London street newsboy to chalk up as his paper bill: "Italy wins the Boat Race." But accidents will happen even to the most prudent exemplars of safety-first. The cruiser *Sydney*, of the Royal Australian Navy, caught two Italian cruisers away from their moorings off Crete, and, although the Italians made off at top speed, bagged the *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, reputed to be the fastest warship of her class afloat. Our seamen were bombed by Italian airmen whilst engaged in rescuing her crew. The Fleet Air Arm splendidly vindicated itself by an attack on the Italian Fleet in Taranto harbour. This took place appropriately on the night of 11th November, 1940, the R.A.F. also lending a useful hand, and half the Italian battleships were put out of action. The *Littorio* and *Cavour* were both left with heavy lists, the former with her forecastle and the latter with her stern under water, and a third was severely mauled. The bag included also two badly listed cruisers and two auxiliaries with their sterns under water.

In March 1941 reconnaissance aircraft reported enemy cruisers at sea—always a thrilling surprise for our seamen—south-east of Sicily. Obviously they were trying to attack our



*Prince of Wales*, both ill-fated ships, made contact with the German at long range. The *Prince of Wales* received slight damage, but the *Hood*, hit in one of her magazines, blew up. Only three survivors of her crew were picked up.

The *Prince of Wales* with the two cruisers continued to shadow the big German and her consort whilst powerful British naval forces rapidly converged on the danger zone. Touch was lost with the German ships for a time, as they steamed at high speed on a southerly course, but in the forenoon of 26th May the *Bismarck* was again picked up by a Catalina aircraft of the Coastal Command some five hundred miles west of Land's End. The *Prinz Eugen* had disappeared, probably making for Brest, and the *Bismarck* was heading east. After one unsuccessful attack by aircraft from the *Ark Royal*, another attempt got home with two torpedoes, one hitting the German amidships and the other on the starboard quarter. The latter hit must have deranged her steering-gear, because she made two complete circles, after which her speed fell away considerably. In the early hours of 27th May our destroyers, led by the famous *Cossack*, attacked the German, and two torpedoes got home. The *Bismarck*, five times torpedoed and with her fore-castle on fire, was now about four hundred miles west of Brest, and travelling at no more than eight knots. Her guns were still firing accurately, however, until the *King George V* and the *Rodney* arrived on the scene, and silenced the German's batteries with terrific salvos. The cruiser *Dorsetshire* then fired another torpedo into her at close range. That was the *coup de grâce*. A desperate chase of nearly two thousand miles was up at last. The huge German battleship, whose potentialities as a commerce raider loose in the Atlantic would have been tremendous, slowly turned over, and then plunged suddenly beneath the waves. That mighty riven hulk lies in the echoless depths where the shell-buried cables creep. . . .

course from south-east to north-west. The combined British squadrons followed in hot pursuit. Hits were claimed by our aircraft from the *Formidable* on the battleship, and her reduced speed certainly confirmed this. About dusk our light naval forces established contact with the enemy, and our destroyers were ordered to attack. A night action ensued in which the British Navy's careful rehearsal of such operations was amazingly vindicated. Our ships turned their searchlights on enemy vessels, and simultaneously swept them with heavy broadsides. We lost two aircraft, but otherwise not a scratch was received by any of our ships, and there were no casualties aboard them. The Italians suffered heavily. Three heavy cruisers, *Zara*, *Fiame*, and *Pola*, were sent to the bottom of Mussolini's "Mare Nostrum," together with four destroyers; and another cruiser may have been sunk. Nothing more was ever glimpsed of the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, and her fate is conjectural. But our people heard heavy gunfire in the night, when no British ships were engaged, and it is probable that the panicky Italians were having a private fight amongst themselves without knowing it. There is no other instance in naval annals of a sea victory so one-sided as this, in which such serious losses were inflicted on one side without any injury at all to the other.

This very cursory survey of the Royal Navy's incomparable ocean travail may fittingly close with a brief account of the sinking of the *Bismarck*, Hitler's most powerful battleship, sister to the *Tirpitz*. This formidable sea fortress, mounting batteries of 16-inch guns and engined to a high speed, was stealing out from Bergen, accompanied by the cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, in May 1941, with the intention of playing the role of Atlantic raider, as did the *Gneisenau* and the *Scharnhorst* before our bombers pounded them in Brest harbour. It was the Coastal Command that first spotted the *Bismarck*, which was later sighted on 23rd May by our cruisers *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*—told off for that purpose after the report from the Coastal Command—between Greenland and Iceland. They shadowed her at high speed, and next day the *Hood* and

This was essayed in a spirit of high adventure. It would be difficult to name any enterprise of equal formidability which was handled in more serene contempt for that odious new doctrine of safety-first which is so alien to our Elizabethan tradition. Directly Italy came into the war by knifing France in the back, a handful of British Army men, officers and N.C.O.s, slipped over the Sudan border into the wilds of Ethiopia. The gay adventurer who led them, and set an example of zestful toughness throughout, was a sixty-year-old Colonel. Through hardships and hazards that would make a modern three-volume Odyssey, they made their way, conducted by native guides, into Gojjam, near the sources of the Blue Nile, where they made contact with loyal Abyssinian chiefs who had never ceased to wage guerilla warfare against the Italian invaders.

Under their experienced tuition, well supplied with the necessary arms and munitions from a Sudan base, the Abyssinian patriots were drilled in up-to-date soldiering. At the same time, back at the Sudan supply base, other Ethiopian natives were coached on similar lines by British and Australian officers and N.C.O.s. The training in Gojjam, be it remarked, was conducted three hundred miles inside what was enemy territory. At the appropriate moment, when things were ready for the grand coup, Haile Selassie was flown in a British bomber from Khartoum to the guerilla headquarters, where he was joined by his two sons and Ras Kassa, a veteran chieftain who six years before had commanded the Northern Abyssinian Army against the Italians. At the same time a dignitary of the Ethiopian Church was flown from Jerusalem. In a dry river bed, in the presence of this select company and the British officers, the Lion of Judah standard of red, green, and gold was formally unfurled and blessed; and after five years of exile Haile Selassie was once more proclaimed Emperor of Abyssinia.

Within six months the Emperor was in complete possession of his historic dominions, save for a mixed garrison of Italians and native levies hopelessly marooned in a fortress at Gondar. In supreme command of these brilliant operations was General

## THE WAR UP TO DATE

### CHAPTER VIII

#### RESTITUTION OF ABYSSINIA JANUARY-MAY 1941

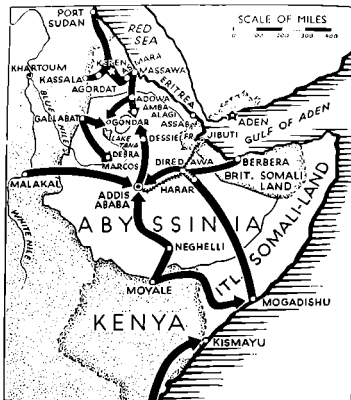
WHEN France went down before Hitler's panzer chariots our position in North Africa was calamitously compromised. It had been agreed that the strong French forces in the Middle East under General Weygand should augment our relatively small Egyptian garrison and take over entirely the defence of British Somaliland. With France out of the fight, and the majority of her African troops adhering, however reluctantly, to the Vichy régime, we were suddenly and very completely in the air. We were faced with a new enemy in Italy, who had large forces in Libya, and another large well-equipped army in East Africa. Mussolini was not slow to take advantage of this fact. Here was another perfectly safe opportunity of cheap swashbuckling. Under his orders Italian troops from East Africa overran British Somaliland, though small British units put up a very gallant rearguard action, and there were exultant heroics in Rome when Berbera fell into Axis hands.

Meanwhile, Marshal Graziani, fabled "the finest military strategist in Europe," advanced from Libya with some three hundred thousand troops, including Italian regulars, Black Shirts, and native levies, to threaten Egypt. The situation at this moment was about as serious for us as it could possibly be. The British Empire seemed in imminent danger of having its main artery severed, as would have been the case if we had lost the Suez Canal. Fortunately we had on the spot some exceptionally competent Army commanders, including General Wavell, and they tackled what looked a well-nigh hopeless situation with energy, skill, and the indomitable optimism which was the special genius of that illustrious French soldier, Marshal Foch. Whilst General Wavell bluffed Graziani into believing we had formidable forces at our disposal to oppose his advance on Egypt, we set about the reconquest of Mussolini's brand-new Abyssinian Empire.

engaged included, besides the "patriots," British regulars, South Africans, Indians, Sudanese, and contingents of the East and West African Rifles. This was no mechanized triumph, but old-style campaigning, with infantry storming mountain fortresses, and repeated hand-to-hand scrapping. Broadly the strategic plan was to outflank the difficult high plateau where Addis Ababa stands by two main drives, one from the north down from Keren and the other from the south up from Kenya.

Our northern forces took Kassala and the strongly held position at Keren, on 27th March, 1941, and captured Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, followed a week later by Massawa. Simultaneously the southern column, operating over a thousand miles away, advanced through Kismayu and Mogadishu on the coastline, and then debouched north through Bagabur and Jijiga. Another force, brought by sea from Aden, retook Berbera, and incidentally cleared British Somaliland of enemy troops. From Jijiga the drive proceeded, with almost incredible speed, by way of Harar, where there was stiff fighting, and Dire-dawa; and our troops marched into Addis Ababa less than two months after the start of the fifteen-hundred-mile advance from Kenya. The main Italian forces under the Duke of Aosta fell back in a north-easterly direction, but we captured Dessie, and the Italians were cornered in the mountain citadel of Amba Alagi, their line of retreat having been cut off by another British force advancing from Asmara. The Duke of Aosta surrendered on 19th May, with his remaining command of about eighteen thousand troops, Addis Ababa having full-heartedly welcomed back Emperor Haile Selassie a fortnight earlier.

Some Italian forces still held out at Gondar in the north and in the difficult lake district in the south, but both these areas were eventually cleaned up by British, South African, Indian and "patriot" troops co-operating in well-planned operations, the last Italian stronghold to surrender being Gondar. This Abyssinian campaign, in its planning and its execution, remains an outstanding example of brilliant generalship, sound staff work, superb leadership, and incomparably



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Cunningham, brother of the Mediterranean Admiral, with headquarters in Nairobi. The reconquest of this vast and difficult country, mountainous and wild, was achieved with immense élan by several converging columns fighting their way to Addis Ababa, the ancient Abyssinian capital. The troops

hitting anything but the desert. They used, amongst other things, red, white, and green tracer bullets, producing an imposing pyrotechnic effect which prompted the British officer in command of our party to comment that it was "like Black-pool on a Saturday night!"

After advancing sixty-five miles, and incurring two thousand casualties to our less than half a hundred, Marshal Graziani once more dug in. This was at Sidi Barrani. While still keeping up our harassing tactics with desert patrols, General Wavell prepared swiftly, and, considering the Italian Fifth Column facilities in Cairo, with astonishing secrecy, to deliver a lightning counter-stroke. It may be mentioned, *à propos* of the Italian colony in Egypt, that a gallant British Admiral declared every time a British squadron left Alexandria some Italian would cable home to Rome: "Auntie much worse." . . . Our counter-attack began on 9th December, 1940, and was what in the theatrical profession is known as an instantaneous success. The broad scheme was to attack Sidi Barrani from east and south, whilst another British force, completely mechanized, dashed across the desert to cut off the Italian retreat well to the west.

The night before the actual attack Sidi Barrani was bombed from the air by the R.A.F., whilst a squadron of Admiral Cunningham's naval ships bombarded it from the sea. To have fifteen-inch naval salvos crescendoing through one's holding at the same time that a cascade of high explosive descends from overhead may be physically but never spiritually uplifting; and captured Italian prisoners later enlarged eloquently on their experience. As a necessary prelude to the assault on Sidi Barrani, a mixed force of Royal Fusiliers and Indian troops, supported by an armoured detachment, surrounded Nibeiwa camp. Our tanks roared into the camp whilst the Italian Staff were sitting down to breakfast. General Maletti, the Italian commander, gallantly operated a machine-gun with his own hands, but was shot through the lungs, and the defence collapsed, yielding us a vital *point d'appui* for the attack on Sidi Barrani from the south, besides over two thousand prisoners and Maletti's second-in-command.

stout soldiering by all the troops concerned. Admittedly the conditions were just those at which the British Army, with its long experience of frontier warfare, most excels, and there is no doubt the Italians, by their brutal attitude towards the natives, contributed much to their own undoing by bitterly alienating the sympathies even of their own native levies. But these facts do not really detract from the high military prestige of an achievement which, against numerical odds of three to one, and an enemy equipped with modern arms and defending themselves in elaborately prepared positions in extremely difficult country, saw an empire reconquered in about twenty-two weeks.

## CHAPTER IX

## UPS AND DOWNS IN LIBYA

**I**NSTEAD of attacking us when we were suddenly left in the lurch by France, Marshal Graziani, encouraged thereto no doubt by the baffling activities of our mechanized desert patrols, gave us four months' respite while his numerically overwhelming forces elaborately dug themselves in behind façades of ferro-concrete bristling with guns and protected by a lavish array of land-mines and acres of barbed wire. The daring of our desert patrols was demoralizing. On one occasion they captured a full-blown Italian General at his advanced headquarters.

But about the middle of September 1940 the Italian Army at last launched its attack on Egypt. Our advanced forces conducted a skilful retiring action which exacted heavy Italian casualties and caused Marshal Graziani to move with extreme caution. Every night the invading enemy built themselves elaborate laagers. One night a party of our gunners noiselessly moved their guns close up to one of these temporary strongholds and opened up a furious point-blank fire. The bewildered Italians expended prodigal ammunition in the darkness without



group, took 80,000 prisoners—including nine generals and over three thousand officers—captured over 200 tanks, 800 guns, and 1,300 machine-guns, and caused a large number of enemy casualties in killed and wounded. Our own casualties were under 1,500.

As our forces swiftly pressed on westward, extending their exceptionally difficult lines of communication, supply problems as usual became more and more difficult. For instance, if we were engaged on big operations, mechanized mobility demanded 25,000 gallons of petrol daily. The vital problem of water was solved by our ubiquitous R.E.'s cleaning out, repairing and extending Roman aqueducts constructed in the days when Mersa Matruh—whence our troops advanced to the attack on Sidi Barrani—was the favourite seaside bathing-resort of Cleopatra and her "curled Anthony." The capture of Sollum, however, eased things a little by enabling some essential supplies to arrive by sea. By 6th January our forces had encircled the outer perimeter of Tobruk, thirty miles in extent. Here was another formidable natural fortress, made impregnable—so it was claimed—by all the forces of skilled Italian military engineers. Our troops attacked at dawn in a violent dust storm, and the place was ours by the second nightfall. Our haul included over 15,000 prisoners and 300 guns, among the captives being a Corps Commander, a Divisional Commander, two other Generals, an Admiral, and many other senior officers. Our casualties were fewer than 500.

Some of the Italian prisoners were in a bad way through lack of water, but they cheered up when given a drink and food. One long procession of them was marched off under the confident custody of a full private of the British Army. Mutual relations were so far from being strained that very shortly one of the Italian prisoners was carrying the British Tommy's rifle for him. The next landmark on our advance was forty miles on—the aerodrome at Gazala—where our troops admired the handiwork of our R.A.F. bombers as testified by the blackened ruins of many Italian warplanes. The enemy put up a stiff resistance at Derna, another formidable natural citadel. Here, as in most places, the Italian artillery fought with exceptional

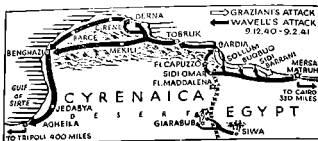
With splendidly efficient naval and air co-operation, our armoured division broke through Sidi Barrani's perimeter defences, followed by the 2nd Queen's, the 1st Argyll and Sutherland, and the 2nd Leicesters. The Highland battalion clinched the business with a bayonet charge. The fight started at dawn, and by tea-time we held Sidi Barrani, with an immense quantity of war material and a great many prisoners, amongst whom was General Gallini, the Italian commander. Our advance proceeded with rapidity, in spite of some tough resistance by the enemy in places. Halfaya, Sollum, and Capuzzo went the same way as Sidi Barrani. By 16th December the Italian occupation of Egypt's western approach, which had been consolidated for three months, had been ended in a week. The next objective, Bardia, was inside Italian territory, and a natural fortress to which Italian engineers had dedicated three years' hard work in perfecting its fortification. Our attack was delivered after nearly three weeks' pounding by guns from the land and sea and bombing from the air. It was immediately preceded by about eight hours' intensive raids by waves of R.A.F. bombers.

The plan was to bisect the enemy's position by tank attack, and thus enable the infantry to polish off each half separately. The worst job fell to Australian sappers, who had many casualties whilst gallantly cutting the enemy wire and filling-in the anti-tank trench under short-range fire from Italian defence posts. Striding after the tanks, as they crashed through the defences, came the Australian infantry, their bayonets faintly silvered in the ghostly light of the pre-dawn moon. Once we had established a footing in the heart of the fortress, we were able to take the enemy defenders in the rear on both sections. We advanced two miles on a nine-mile front the first day, taking some ten thousand prisoners, and by the afternoon of the third day Bardia was ours. The Italian commander, General Bergonzoli—famed as "Electric Beard" but known to irreverent British Tommies as "Old Gorgonzola"—managed to escape on foot, but we took 40,000 prisoners. In fact General Wavell's forces in one month advanced 160 miles, scuppered eight enemy divisions and an armoured

spirit and efficiency, but our guns knocked their batteries out one by one, and a bayonet charge by Australian infantry carried heights commanding the town. The enemy then evacuated the place, but caused our sappers immense toil and a good deal of Army vernacular by extensive demolition work to roads and bridges. Our forces still kept pushing ahead along the coastal road, but reconnaissance planes brought word that Benghazi, where it had been fully expected the enemy would make their main stand, was already being evacuated.

General O'Connor, the Corps Commander who personally directed the British advance from Sidi Barrani to Benghazi, promptly ordered the armoured division, under the intrepid command of General Creagh, to leather-away at top speed across the desert to cut off the enemy's retreat. The "going"—across this 150 miles of almost unexplored wilderness—was a nightmare; but General Creagh's indomitable and resourceful drivers achieved the impracticable. Jolting and rattling over terrible ground, boulder-strewn and full of terrific switchbacks, they reached the coastal road just ahead of the retiring Italian forces from Benghazi. A thirty-six-hour battle ensued, in which our armoured division was greatly outnumbered by the enemy forces it was holding up. But our other forces, advancing along the coast route, presently came into action, and after a stiff fight which littered ten miles of road with the wreckage of men and machines, the Italians were utterly routed. We took 20,000 prisoners, 216 guns, 112 tanks, 500 lorries, and—Mussolini's "Electric Beard" General. In sixty-two days we had captured 139,295 prisoners, 1,380 guns, and 420 tanks.

This will remain an amazing record of adventurous success in a campaign—the first ever fought between mechanized armies under such conditions—over a desert roughly the size of India. Unhappily this triumph had a disastrous anti-climax. General Wavell had to weaken his forces in North Africa in order to send a British Expeditionary Force to assist the Greeks. Meanwhile, seizing this carefully calculated opportunity, Hitler sent strong German forces, specially trained, to reinforce the Italians in western Libya, our advance having



16. THE WAR IN LIBYA

perimeter, and successfully held it against all enemy attacks for over six months. This despite heavy bombardment from the ground and the air and determined attacks by Axis tanks. The Royal Navy rendered splendid service with its guns in repelling these attacks, and also, turning its over-worked destroyers into a sort of naval Carter Paterson, by delivering supplies right into the port under cover of night. In the meantime General Auchinleck had taken over the Near East Command from General Wavell, who became General Officer Commanding-in-Chief in India, and later on in the South Pacific. Strongly reinforced, both with men and tanks, despite the diversion of much badly needed equipment to Russia, General Auchinleck in November 1941 launched another attack on the Axis Libyan forces. His avowed object was not the capture of territory but the destruction of the whole of the enemy's mechanized strength.

The presence of German panzer divisions, and the stiffening influence of German troops on the Italians, made this a far tougher proposition than the earlier one. Opposed to 90,000 German and Italian troops, General Auchinleck's forces numbered no more than 45,000. If there was numerical equality in tanks, our lighter ones, mostly American, were both outweighed and out-ranged by General Rommel's, which mounted six-pounder guns against our two-pounders. This was rather like pitting destroyers against cruisers. Yet our advance went well, if somewhat slowly, until a furious maelstrom of embattled tanks raged round Sidi Rezegh. Our scheme of operations had involved three movements. Our armoured forces struck north-west across the desert from Fort Maddalena on a straight line for Tobruk. Indian and New Zealand troops wheeled left to by-pass strong enemy positions on their right and take them in rear. A third force, of British Indian and South African troops, headed straight from the southern Jarabub oasis into the almost tractless desert to cut the enemy's communications with Tripoli.

Whilst the fierce tank mêlée was in progress round Sidi Rezegh, the Tobruk garrison made a gallant sortie, fighting grimly all the way, to join up with our forces in that area.

halted at El Agheila. The German Commander, General Rommel, delivered a swift surprise counter-attack, heavily backed by tanks, and rushed our thinly held advanced positions. On 25th March, 1941, he retook El Agheila and within three weeks had recaptured the whole of Cyrenaica. Our light tanks, sadly in need of overhaul after their strenuous non-stop work over terrible ground, were badly mauled, and our infantry advance forces hard-pressed. We desperately needed now those forces which had been transferred to Greece. Too small to be of great help to the Greeks, they might have been more than enough to check the enemy's counter-stroke in Libya. As it was, hopelessly outweighed, we were driven right back to the Egyptian frontier, with considerable losses in brave men and war-worn equipment. Particularly bitter fighting took place round Mersa Brega, where great gallantry was shown by Indian troops who closed with the enemy guns in a bayonet charge. This enabled a mixed body of British and Australian infantry to zig-zag through strong enemy positions, and finally to reach Tobruk in good order despite fierce scrapping. During this heart-breaking retreat three British Generals were made prisoners by the enemy. They had driven off the road, which was blocked by transport, and were surprised by a German motor-cyclist patrol armed with Tommy-guns. The officers concerned were Lieut.-General Neame, Lieut.-General O'Connor, and Major-General Gambier-Parry. Rumour has it that General Wavell escaped their fate by a margin of no more than ten minutes.

Though by this sudden reverse we lost all the territory we had gained so brilliantly, with serious results in the limitations imposed on our air operations over the Mediterranean, it remains true that we had practically destroyed Mussolini's Libyan army, which was in fact the main purpose of our attack. It had never been contemplated that our forces should press beyond Tobruk, but the easy going against Mussolini's Italians invited further adventure. This disaster was partly retrieved by the decision to hold Tobruk as a coastal outpost. Here our troops who had fought their way from Mersa Brega, reinforced by an Australian division, manned a thirty-mile

## GREECE AND CRETE

the enemy's ranks to rejoin our main forces. This remarkable see-saw of military fortunes suggests that we have still to solve the problem of adding solidarity to the rapidity of mechanized advance. A modern army marches on its petrol tins.

### CHAPTER X

## GREECE AND CRETE APRIL 1941

DESPITE his treacherous attack on France in June 1940 Mussolini had received as yet no compensation. He was anxious to add more territory quickly to his Fascist Empire and so in the autumn of 1940 he suddenly invaded Greece from Albania. Apparently he had been completely deluded as to the probable reaction of the Greeks, whom he fully expected to knuckle down and afford the Italian Army a triumphant route march to Athens. The Italian Ambassador in Athens is understood to have complained afterwards that someone had deliberately led him up the garden. The Italians soon discovered their mistake. Their first momentum carried them a few miles over the Greek frontier, but within a few weeks they were contesting desperate rearguard actions well back in Albania. Despite the more profuse modern fighting equipment of the Italians, they were decisively whipped by the Greeks in every important engagement. When they tried an elaborate counter-attack on a 25-mile front round Klisura, with their Duce present in person to inspire the Roman eagles, the Greeks smashed that enterprise so utterly that the Italians had nearly 50,000 casualties, and were still on the retreat towards the Adriatic. In fact the Greeks complained that, when the wind blew in their direction, the roads were thick with cock-feathers from the helmets of the Bersaglieri, Mussolini's crack corps of quick-trotting infantry.

This spirited action by Greece, first of the smaller neutral

Junction was actually effected, but later broken again by formidable enemy tank drives. There is no denying General Rommel's skillful and daring enterprise as a tank tactician. Six days after our attack was launched—incidentally it nipped in the bud Axis plans for a big assault on Tobruk—a German motorized column was actually sent right through the thick of the fighting and over the Egyptian frontier, where its efforts to disorganize our communications were checkmated none too soon. The Sidi Rezegh fighting took place over 2,000 miles of desert, often amidst dense sand-storms, with the combatants fantastically mixed up, and tanks churning up dust columns which rendered friend and foe indistinguishable at a hundred yards. More than once scattered British and German tank units, each busily effecting repairs, found themselves within hammer-sound of each other. Surpassing valour was shown in the Sidi Rezegh battle, not only by our out-weighted and out-gunned tank crews, but by infantry who stood up stoutly to panzer attacks. South African and New Zealand troops as well as Indians and British Regulars earned "a place in the story."

Finding the pace too hot, General Rommel gave ground, and fell back on Gazala. Our fighting infantry, notably Indian troops, withstood another fierce counter-thrust, but, as other British units were working round his flanks, General Rommel divided his forces in two and made off at top speed. Headed by light tanks, our pursuing troops recaptured all the now-familiar coastal towns we lost in the reverse that followed General Wavell's first successful advance. We reached and held the important port of Benghazi. The retiring Axis troops, putting up a stout rearguard action all the way, reached Agheila, the limit of our earlier advance, and then, having received strong reinforcements of men and machines from Tripoli, suddenly turned and overwhelmed our weak advance forces. In addition to capturing many of our supply dumps laboriously collected in the desert, General Rommel retook Benghazi and Derna and advanced to Gazala. One Indian Brigade managed with great skill and gallantry to avoid encirclement in Benghazi, and fought its way back through



were characteristically now attacking them in the back from the Albanian border with swarms of motor-cyclists and armoured cars, and the situation was further complicated by Croat Fifth Columnism. What remained of the Yugoslav Army surrendered on 17th April at Serajevo, where the historic pistol-shot was fired that started the last war. General Simonvitch and young King Peter escaped by air, with most of the Yugoslav Ministers, to Greece.

The tragic collapse of the gallant Serbs had calamitous repercussions on the Greek front. There our small British Expeditionary Force, borrowed from General Wavell in Libya, and consisting about fifty-fifty of British and Anzac troops under the command of General Sir Henry Wilson, had taken up a position guarding the threatened frontier, with the Greek Army in Albania on its left, and the rest of the Greek forces on its right. It had a few tanks that were much in need of overhaul after their recent strenuous employment in the Libyan blitzkrieg and exactly fifteen first-line fighter planes. The Germans used a thousand planes, three hundred of them fighters. Yugoslavia's débâcle had the fatal result of unclosing the Monastir Gap, down which the Germans advanced in mechanized might, thus cutting the line of retreat whereby the Greek forces in Albania might have fallen back to join up with ours.

It may be mentioned here that the fighting spirit of the Serbs still burnt fiercely. The sturdy tradition of a warrior race persisted. They adopted extensive guerilla tactics, which later developed into regular military operations, in which they even made use of salvaged planes to harass the German troops of occupation. But the Greek Army in Albania, which had given such a heroic account of itself against the Italian aggressors, was now taken between two fires, with the Germans behind it, and the Italians, showing fight now that the Greeks were *in extremis*, in front. On 22nd April these troops had no alternative but surrender. Meanwhile, the Greco-British forces, though fiercely contesting every available vantage ground, were being driven rapidly from pillar to post back towards the sea.

The Germans had crossed the Greek frontier from Bulgaria

nations in Europe to stand up to Axis blackmail, aroused immense enthusiasm and admiration in Britain and America. We handicapped ourselves a good deal in our Libyan operations by sending several R.A.F. squadrons to help the Greeks, who otherwise would have been disastrously overweighted from the air. The Italians were in a thoroughly bad way—a superb historical example of the bitter bit—when finally Hitler came to their rescue.

By diplomatic intrigue on the familiar power-politics lines, Germany had already practically turned Roumania into a military dependency, and Bulgaria into a jackal accessory. A similar coup only just failed in Yugoslavia. The Belgrade Government of Prince Paul signed the usual Quisling pact on the dotted line at Berchtesgaden, whither they had been summoned by Hitler, and Prince Paul, the Regent, ordered general demobilization of the Yugoslav army. As it proved, that step had irreparable disorganizing effects a little later in preventing any successful Yugoslav defence. But meanwhile the Quisling Belgrade Ministry was overthrown by the Army leaders, who had the backing of an enthusiastic populace. The Regent was deposed, his Quisling Ministers disappeared, and General Simonvitch formed a new patriotic Ministry under the young King Peter.

But at dawn on 6th April, 1941, Hitler's mechanized legions roared over the Yugoslav frontier, thrusting at Belgrade and southward down the Struma Valley towards Salonika. In this manoeuvre they were aided by Hungary, who gave Hitler's troops the freedom of its territory to launch the attack. Incidentally, following their approved method, the Germans opened their attack on Yugoslavia by a perfectly indefensible and pitiless mass assault by the Luftwaffe on Belgrade. This outrage stands in the scroll of international infamy cheek by jowl with the German attack on Rotterdam.

There were no braver or tougher soldiers in the world than the Serbs, as they showed conclusively in the last war, but, their mobilization disorganized, they had no chance against the overwhelming odds of men and machines hurled against them by the German High Command. Moreover, the Italians



#### 19. THE WAR IN GREECE

*Hatched lines show successive British positions. Black lines German attack. Broken Black lines Italian attacks.*

at five points between the Maritza Valley and the Struma Valley, and the weight of machines and men they threw into the attack was irresistible. British and Greek troops rivalled each other in desperate heroism. But the mechanized avalanche pressed on. Terrific execution was done against the enemy in mountain passes by British and Anzac artillery and machine-gunners. According to one New Zealand officer the German infantry actually in some cases pressed on over their own dead until our guns were too hot to fire—worn down by carnage. This officer declared that the Germans came on with linked arms, and showed signs of having been doped. Compelled by the collapse on the Albanian front to abandon the original plan of fighting a delaying action on the Metaxas line, in conformity with the Greeks our troops withdrew to the Olympus line on a front extending along the northern slopes of that mountain through the town of Serfje to the north-west. On a further withdrawal becoming imperative, in spite of a gallant defence, we withdrew to the Thermopylae line, which extended from the town of that name to the Vralo Pass and Mount Parnassus. Two battalions of New Zealanders at one time occupied the classic Vale of Tempe. This position was soon outflanked by German and Italian troops from Epirus, and in face of an increasingly hopeless situation our forces, fighting all the way, retreated, some to the Peloponnese, some to the Piraeus, and some to smaller ports of Attica. Not only the Greek soldiers but the Greek ministers and people behaved magnificently to the end.

When it became obvious that surrender was inevitable, the British Government were informed of the fact beforehand, told that further sacrifice by our B.E.F. would be vain, with the suggestion that the latter should be withdrawn forthwith. In France even our gallant B.E.F., as they marched to the boat to embark after the débâcle, were hooted by French crowds. The Greeks showered flowers on our men when they arrived—and when they withdrew. This withdrawal was carried out with great difficulty under constant harrying by German bombers, who followed our transports half-way to Egypt. Approximately about 44,000 men were safely evacuated out of

showered down to them by parachute, and were constantly in communication with their bases by portable wireless sets. At Heraklion, where we had a first-class Regular brigade of infantry, consisting of two Highland battalions, one Welsh, and one English county battalion, a thousand parachutists, landing at the rate of two seconds per man, were wiped out completely in two hours, including those who took to the hills. Royal Marine gunners put up a gallant defence, too, at other places. Observers reported that about half the air-borne enemy troops crashed, but that the most formidable were those brought, ready armed, in troop-carriers. They were instantly ready for action, when they did not crash, whereas the paratroops always needed a few moments to recover their balance and then to collect their equipment.

The dive-bombers, it was also reported, were more intimidating than actually dangerous. One of our batteries, which remained steadily in action throughout, sustained only three or four casualties during two days' Stuka attacks. On the other hand, where a small party of our troops took cover from a Stuka attack, and following air-borne troops were in consequence able to effect a safe landing, within ten minutes every one of our men had been either killed or captured by the latter. Whilst descending the paratroops look more numerous than they actually are, and, if handled promptly, are easily dealt with. But when attacking with air-borne troops the Germans, as in ordinary fighting, are entirely regardless of casualties so long as they can attain their objective. They seek to wear down opposition by keeping on sending over more and more men, eventually, they hope, to effect a lodgment, and on that to build up a bridgehead or *point d'appui*.

The loss of Crete had serious and far-reaching consequences extremely unfavourable to us. Apart from the loss of prestige and the heavy casualties involved, especially to the Navy, it deprived us of an invaluable air and naval base, and had crippling effects on our naval and air operations in the Levant as well as in North Africa.

about 56,000. Part of the Greek fleet escaped to Egypt, though many were sunk by Axis bombers, five hospital ships being in the number.

As a sequel to the tragedy of Greece came the fiasco of Crete. Thousands of our troops from Greece were evacuated to Crete. The majority of them were without their full equipment, and many had no weapons at all. On 19th May the Germans attacked the island from the Greek mainland and from the Dodecanese Islands. Our troops were very inadequately provided with anti-aircraft guns, and, owing to the prohibitive distance from the R.A.F.'s Egyptian bases, had no protection from the air. Nevertheless, in face of incessant dive-bombing by the Luftwaffe, and constant relays of German paratroops and air-borne troops, our men, with the Cretans, put up a desperate fight for twelve days. On the 1st June evacuation was decided on, however, and about 17,000 troops managed to reach Egypt.

Grievous losses were sustained by the Royal Navy in cruisers and destroyers, first in intercepting all sea-borne enemy troops trying to reach Crete, and afterwards in once more rescuing a British Expeditionary Force from the jaws of disaster. Undauntedly facing incessant concentrated attacks from the air in narrow waters, our warships sank many enemy transports, and thousands of German troops were drowned. No enemy troops actually landed on Crete from the sea, unless perhaps in a few small sailing boats under cover of night. But the Germans, with complete freedom of the air, launched persistent attacks against Maleme, Suda Bay, Retimo, and Heraklion by means of parachutes, air-carriers, and gliders. These were preceded by waves of Stuka dive-bombers with the object of making our defending troops seek cover, and so affording the air-borne Germans a favourable opportunity to land.

These attacks were successfully dealt with until the enemy managed at last to secure a foothold at Maleme airfield. Though the first German arrivals were mowed down, more kept arriving, until at last there were enough survivors to hold the position. The German air-borne troops had equipment

airmen, and had, moreover, given direct aid to Rashid Ali in his revolt. The British Government joined with General Catroux, of the De Gaulle Free French Forces, in pledging themselves to Syrian liberty and independence, and British and Free French Forces from Palestine and Transjordan entered Syria in June. A British column under General Wilson advanced along the coast towards Beirut, and the Free French, commanded by General Gentilhomme, moved on Damascus. General Dentz had strong forces under his command, including light tanks and such tough and seasoned campaigners as the Foreign Legion and well-trained Sengalese troops.

There was some stiff fighting, but our force, much aided by naval co-operation along the coastal sector, was in sight of Beirut at the end of the month, whilst the Free French captured Damascus on 21st June. Though severely wounded by a bomb during the early fighting, General Gentilhomme pluckily continued to direct the Free French Forces throughout. It was originally hoped that the French troops would not resist. So much so that the Australians started out wearing their slouch-hats instead of shrapnel helmets. This hope was disappointed, and the campaign was not without its moments of anxiety. The Vichy French made skilful use of their artillery and tanks, and delivered several well-timed counter-attacks. In Kuneitra 350 men of a famous London battalion fought against superior forces until their ammunition was expended, and about a hundred of them were made prisoners, but in less than two hours the position had been recaptured. The Australians were driven out of Merj Ayoun at one time, but promptly re-took it.

From a compatriot serving with the Foreign Legion, who was among a number of prisoners captured, the Australians learnt that the Vichy French troops had been led to suppose they were fighting the Italians. In view of the display given by the Italians elsewhere, this must have been a distinctly galling assurance even from a compatriot. There were romantic incidents in the campaign. As when a captured British Staff Officer was taken to dinner at the Damascus Military Club with Vichy French officers, and afterwards allowed to walk back to his own headquarters. Or, again, when Australian squadrons flying

## IRAQ, SYRIA AND IRAN

GERMAN intrigue and the subservience of Vichy France to Hitler's schemes confronted us early in 1941 with serious trouble in the Middle East. This necessitated our embarking on military operations in Iraq, Syria, and Iran, which in normal times would have been considered of first-class importance, but under world-war conditions became merely side-shows. In Iraq the ex-Prime Minister, Rashid Ali, with four Iraqi colonels, staged a revolt which overthrew the existing government and drove out the Regent, Emir Abdul Ilah, in favour of a puppet nominated by a carefully packed Assembly. Though Rashid Ali protested firm adherence to the Anglo-Iraqi alliance, he refused to admit British troops in accordance with our treaty rights, and, when we insisted on sending them, attacked our aerodrome at Habbaniya with artillery and planes. At the same time German technicians arrived in Iraq in French planes from Syria with the obvious connivance of Petain's Government. The situation of our small force at Habbaniya was for the moment precarious, but the speedy arrival of reinforcements from India and Palestine enabled us to take the offensive. British troops under General Clarke reached Baghdad, raising an uncomfortable siege-blockade of the British Embassy, and causing the usurping Iraqi leaders to bolt into Iran.

The insurgents, disappointed of the prompt help the German agents had pledged them, made a remarkably poor show in sundry brushes with our forces, but organized a serious anti-Jewish riot in Baghdad by way of a final fling. We took control of the fortunately undamaged oilfields, and the lawful Regent was reinstated, with a Government of which General Nuri es-Said became Prime Minister. General Nuri was closely and very gallantly associated with the legendary exploits in the last war of our Colonel Lawrence of Arabia. The position in Syria now demanded attention. The Vichy Commander there, General Dentz, was harbouring a swarm of German agents and



did not elect to join their Free French comrades were repatriated. We held General Dentz and some of his officers, however, until missing British prisoners, who had been flown to an unknown location, had been found and duly brought back.

Steps of the utmost importance were next taken to prevent German influence completely dominating Iran, a country still identified more readily by most of us, including Mr. Churchill, under its old name of Persia. There had been a steady and sinister influx of German "tourists" into that country to join the considerable body of German "technicians" already in residence. Representations by London and Moscow as to the undesirable character of these immigrants, and the necessity for their expulsion if Persia was to preserve its neutrality and the amenities therewith associated, were treated by the Shah with oriental evasion. Accordingly, on 25th August, British and Russian troops marched into Persia. There was a three-day "token" resistance, probably to save face with Berlin, and then the Shah capitulated. He accepted the Anglo-Russian terms, which included the occupation of strategic points, evacuation of German and Italian visitors, surrender of certain Iraqi fugitives, and the right to transport supplies to Russia across his country.

It soon became evident that the Shah was not complying with the armistice terms. No serious attempt was made to clear out the Axis agents, and Germans, swaggering in the streets of Teheran, were still arrogantly insulting British subjects. The Allied forces accordingly advanced to the suburbs of the capital, with the result that on 6th September the Shah abdicated in favour of his son, and the Axis Ministers with their large entourage were shown off the premises. The Shah's career had been a romantic one. A man of lowly origin but exotic tastes, he rose from being a cavalry trooper to seize the throne of Persia, and showed as ruler no little ability combined with immense cupidity. He was in the habit of publicly kicking his Ministers if they offended him. Amongst the fugitives who escaped from Teheran was the Mufti of Jerusalem, whom we made the profound mistake of not hanging when a favourable and justifiable opportunity had much earlier offered.



#### 20. OPERATIONS IN IRAQ, SYRIA AND IRAN

(1) Iraq, 2nd-31st May, 1941. (2) The Cleaning up of Syria, 8th June to 13th July, 1941. (3) The occupation of Iran by British and Russian forces, 25th-28th August, 1941.

American fighters, shot down six enemy planes over Palmyra, the ancient Roman town.

Another British column, advancing from Iraq, took Palmyra on 3rd July. Six days later General Dentz requested an armistice. Terms were agreed, and signed at Acre, another historic town associated with our Richard Cœur de Lion and the Crusades. General Wilson signed for the Allies and General de Verdillac for the Vichy Government. All French troops who

he was wont on request to entertain select Berlin evening parties with his pantomimic parody of that British Prime Minister—complete with umbrella effects.

Obviously, the Pact with Russia was meant to insure Hitler's anxious General Staff against their *bête noire*—the possibility of having to conduct a major war on two fronts. But the Russians kept the agreement with meticulous fidelity. When the British sea blockade began to operate, Russia constituted the main leak through which invaluable supplies filtered through to Germany. However, the appropriate moment arrived, in Hitler's intuitive view, for an attack on Russia. There was strong opposition amongst some of Hitler's military chiefs and Nazi colleagues—not on any ethical but purely on strategic grounds—but Hitler's influence carried the day. Before dawn, on Sunday, 22nd June, 1941, apparently on the principle "the better the day the better the deed," the full grand swing of Germany's war-machine was hurled against Russia on a fifteen-hundred-mile front.

Beyond a personal warning some weeks earlier from the British Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, on the strength of Rudolf Hess's revelations, as usual the first intimation received by the victims of this monumental double-cross was the roar overhead of Luftwaffe bombers attacking Russian aerodromes. The German communiqués claimed the destruction of over two thousand Russian planes, most of them on the ground, within a comparatively few hours. No doubt the expectation was that Germany would snatch air-mastery over Russia from the start. These impressive claims may not have been intentionally mendacious. A Russian General has since hinted that the Nazis are not the only people who had taken the precaution of setting up serried rows of papier mâché planes as decoy ducks. It is probable that there was a subtle diplomatic as well as a strategic object in this treacherous assault on the Soviet.

The strategic object was to remove the threat to Germany's eastern flank of a formidable Russian Army in the event of major military operations in the West by or against Britain. But there was also the diplomatic hope that, by suddenly attacking Russia, a purblind western democracy might be

This dangerous intriguer had conducted a persistent anti-British propaganda for years, and was the inspirer of countless conspiracies against us in Palestine. He found congenial sanctuary in Italy.

British and American engineers promptly set to work re-organizing the transport service through Persia for Russian supplies, and, influenced perhaps by a German setback on the Moscow sector, the new Persian Prime Minister signed a treaty of alliance with Great Britain and Russia. Under this document we guaranteed, with Russia, the sovereignty of Persia and its territorial integrity, and Persia agreed to render the Allies assistance of a strictly non-military character. All these operations in Iraq, Syria, and Iran were of the utmost importance in their bearing on the world-war, but passed almost unnoticed in the pageant of more sensational events elsewhere. It was in Persia, land of the poet tent-maker, Omar Khayyam, that British and Russian troops found their first opportunity in this war for comradely fraternization.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE DOUBLE CROSS

**A** WEEK or two before he attacked Poland, Hitler with a great flourish of oratorical olive branches made a hard-and-fast Pact of non-aggression with Russia. It was to be a dateless bargain to engrossing neighbourliness. But with Mr. Schickelgruber such pledges were never more than temporary expediences. More than once he had avowed with engaging candour that he was ready at any time to promise anything to anyone who was fool enough to believe him. In fact, it must have amused Hitler to find how full Europe was of important people eager to accept these scraps of paper as everlasting covenants of sound international currency. Hitler does not, except introspectively, lack a sense of the palpably comic. After his Munich encounter with our Mr. Chamberlain,

Prussia towards Leningrad, from Poland through Minsk towards Moscow, and through the Ukraine towards Kieff and the important industrial area of the Don basin north of the Black Sea. The Finns, eager to settle recent scores, joined in the Leningrad attack, and the Roumanians, covetous of territorial spoils and credulous of German promises, in the Ukrainian advance.

The invaders made quick progress at first against the Russian frontier guards, but found a far stiffer opposition when they encountered the main forces of the defending Russian armies. But still the momentum of the elaborately planned offensive carried the Germans, with their spearhead panzer divisions, deeper and deeper into Russia. At first the heaviest fighting was north of the Pripet Marshes. At Bialystok big Russian forces, enveloped by the favourite Prussian pincer movement, partially extricated themselves only by desperate fighting. The Soviet troops displayed remarkable subordinate initiative combined with splendid discipline. German commanders complained of their "brutish tenacity."

With the Finns and Roumanians, the Germans had also enlisted Hungarian, Italian, some Bulgarian, and other forces, probably totalling eventually between twenty and thirty divisions. The Germans themselves mustered at least one hundred and seventy divisions. The gallantry and efficiency of the Russian defence, however, tested the German military machine to the uttermost, and exacted staggering casualty lists of men and machines all the way.

By miracles of transport organization—everything was ready cut-and-dried for the change-over from their own to the broader Russian railway gauge—the Germans contrived time and again to concentrate overwhelming weight at different sectors of the huge battle front, now in the north, then in the south, then on the central Moscow sector. Moreover, as they were constantly on the advance, they had the great advantage of harvesting all salvageable battle litter, from derelict tanks to petrol tins. In the case of tanks this amounted to a very considerable asset. But the Russians, who had evidently studied to some purpose the German blitzkrieg methods in France,

swung over actually to regard Germany as leading a holy crusade against the Bolshevik *jahherwork*. It may seem incredible that Hitler and his gangster associates could imagine the leaders of democracy were quite so stupid as that, yet there is fairly convincing testimony to that effect. One of the shilling-shocker thrills of this war was the unannounced arrival in this island of Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, to whom he dictated *Mein Kampf* in prison after the first abortive Munich *emeute*. Hess made a dare-devil flight by plane from Germany on the night of 10th May, 1941, during one of the heaviest air-raids directed against this country. He landed by parachute near Glasgow after crashing his machine, and was, of course, promptly put under lock and key. But Mr. Churchill has confirmed the rumour that Hess firmly believed, when he brought the news that Hitler was about to attack Russia, the "Churchill clique" would be promptly turned out, and favourable peace terms agreed. Sir Patrick Dollan, who was Glasgow's Lord Provost at the time of Hess's escapade, has testified that the "favourable peace terms" were humiliating, and involved the basest desertion of all our Allies and principles. That Hitler shared the belief that such conditions might be acceptable to us suggests that he has derived his conception of this country and its people from some queer sources.

He was quickly disillusioned. The British Prime Minister lost not a moment in declaring our resolve to help Russia to the utmost of our capacity in every possible way in the fight to destroy Hitler and the last trace of Nazi-ism, and President Roosevelt was not slow in announcing a similar determination. Germany's utterly cynical and perfidious attack on Russia seemed to afford some key to Moscow's earlier action, much resented at the time here and in America, in extending Russia's western frontiers at the expense of adjoining Baltic States and Finland, and also to the Red Army's occupation of Eastern Poland after the fall of Warsaw. Because the result of these operations was to provide a strip of buffer territory which took the first impact of the German onslaught. The latter extended, in varying intensity, from the Arctic to the Black Sea. But the most formidable drives were directed from Finland and East

developed a new technique of defence in depth. Avoiding the disastrous mistake of trying to make a dissolving infantry front line conform to rapidly moving enemy tank thrusts, they adopted the plan of oasis fighting, rather on longitudinal than latitudinal lines, and kept on engaging the nearest Germans, even though miles behind the enemy's spearhead tank attack. The Russian airmen and tank crews fought with magnificent *elan* and courage. They were frequently outnumbered but seldom out-battled. Though at ruinous cost in troops and equipment, the Germans kept pressing on. But the Russians adopted a ruthless "scorched earth" policy. All the enemy inherited on their advance was the bare terrain and blackened ruins. They captured no booty and found no shelter. Even the great and costly Dnieper dam was sabotaged. Infuriated by the unexpectedly determined resistance they encountered, and not least by the terrorizing Russian guerilla fighting behind their lines, the Germans revealed their most sadistic Hun streak, and were guilty of unprintable atrocities on captured Russian soldiers and civilians, including men, women, and children. The grim evidence of this, in the towns and villages later recaptured by the Russians on their counter-offensive, caused the Red armies to fight with a dour fury that recoiled on the Huns.

The Finns moved round the north of Lake Ladoga, and Berlin claimed that Leningrad was besieged. Actually, its communications were never entirely broken, and, under the energetic direction of Marshal Voroshiloff, the Leningrad defences held. On the central sector, after Smolensk had been taken, the Germans smashed through to within about thirty miles of Moscow. Though the official machinery of Government was transferred far back to eastern Russia, Premier Stalin resolutely stuck to his post in the historic Kremlin, constantly inspiring the defenders of the capital, and Marshal Timoshenko, the Russian Commander-in-Chief in the field stoutly held the Moscow inner defence lines.

On the southern sector the German developed grimly threatening thrusts. They overran all the important industrial area of the Don basin, and occupied Rostoff, at the same time invading the Crimea after taking the battered husk of Odessa.



21. THE WAR IN RUSSIA



resolute defence the Red Armies on this sector also turned to energetic attack, and their offensive drove back the German field-grey legions until even Smolensk, where Hitler had proposed to set up his winter headquarters, seemed within their grasp. A dramatic role in defeating the last German drive to outflank Moscow was played by the famous Cossack cavalry who were thrown into the battle in mass. The Cossacks, moving rapidly over the frozen terrain, also played havoc during the retreat of the invaders by raiding their communications. These white-clad rough-riders, invisible against the snow, spread terror amongst Hitler's cosmopolitan conscripts by midnight forays in which sabres glimmered in the frosty moonlight at forty degrees below zero.

During their retreat the Germans adopted all those cunning tricks with which our troops became familiar in the last war when following up an enemy retirement. They even improved on them. Many Russian salvage corps men were killed, before the filthy device was discovered, by concealed bombs exploding when they attempted to remove a dead body for burial. As an illuminating sidelight on Berlin's talk of an ordered retirement to winter quarters came the news that Field-Marshal Brauchitsch, the German Commander-in-Chief, had been relieved of his post for health reasons, and that ex-Lance-Corporal Hitler had taken over supreme command. It was announced that henceforth the latter would direct grand strategy according to his infallible "intuitions." This seemed to substitute crystal-gazing for the higher military textbooks. British and American equipment, notably planes and tanks, reached Russia towards the climax of the German attack. This was the immediate outcome of a British and American Mission's visit, headed by Lord Beaverbrook, to discuss mutual plans with Premier Stalin and his colleagues in Moscow. Some of our R.A.F. fighter squadrons also served for some weeks on the Russian front, and established very cordial relations with their Russian comrades. Their intercourse with the Luftwaffe was in its way equally hearty—but more drastic.

One magnificent feat of improvisation organized by the Russians was the quick transfer of factories and workers from the devastated areas to new and active sites well behind the

Leaving General Zhukoff, who proved himself a most capable successor, to continue the Moscow defence, Marshal Timoshenko took control in the south. Reorganizing a somewhat shaky position, and reinforced with crack divisions of Siberian troops, he then effectually turned the tables. Outflanking the enemy round Rostoff, he drove them headlong back, in some cases with symptoms of *saute qui peut*, to Taganrog.

Within a few weeks after Hitler, with flourish of trumpets, had announced a last and final offensive that was to give Germany the Russian capital and decisive victory on the Russian front, the Russians had launched right along the line a spirited counter-offensive which rolled back the German armies, again at great cost in casualties, roughly about a third of the distance—ranging between 300 and 400 miles—that they had originally gained with such travail. The Germans put it about that they were merely retiring into winter quarters, but this specious pretence did not at all square with the known facts. The alleged voluntary retirement was obviously a bitterly enforced retreat. The moment of Russia's counter-thrust was well chosen. The Germans had extended lines of communication through terribly testing terrain. Indomitable Russian bands of guerilla fighters were perpetually harassing those lines. It took more than a gallon of fuel to get a gallon of fuel up to the front line. The Russian winter, pitiless and penetrating, was upon the scorched and ruined land, and the German troops, because their leaders had reckoned on victory by the close of autumn, were not attired for such an occasion. They froze to death in thousands, whilst an epidemic of typhus swept their shivering ranks. What Hitler's conscripted Italian levies endured in that ordeal only they can faithfully narrate to Mussolini.

It may be noted, as a significant development of modern tactics, that General Zhukoff's troops on the Moscow sector defeated the final desperate German bid for the Soviet capital by holding up the supporting enemy infantry and isolating and destroying the advanced tank spearheads. The Germans hurled three thousand tanks into this last attack, but even that gigantic effort failed, in face of the devoted and efficient Russian defence, to vindicate the German Führer's premature boast. From

coerced Vichy into allowing Indo-China to be used as a military *point d'appui* for launching an attack on the south-west Pacific. Japanese troop movements into that French colony were clearly the preliminaries to an attack through Thailand, otherwise Siam, on Malaya and Singapore. But Tokyo, in the matter of treacherous surprise, improved even on the classic examples of the author of *Mein Kampf*.

Japanese plenipotentiaries were actually in Washington, suavely discussing a possible settlement of difficulties, when Tokyo's war lords launched out of the blue a murderous attack on Pearl Harbour, American's great naval and air base in the Hawaiian islands. While the Washington talks were still proceeding, a powerful Japanese armada was secretly steaming full-tilt across the Pacific. The blow fell on Sunday, 7th December, sudden as the swoop of a kite. The Americans at Pearl Harbour were caught napping, and widespread damage was done to U.S. naval vessels and aircraft by Japanese bombers, who had things so much their own way that it was well over ninety minutes before a shot was fired from a shore battery against the raiders. One U.S. officer had sighted, and reported, a large number of aircraft in the offing, but it was taken for granted these were their own. The naval and military commanders concerned at Pearl Harbour were, after an inquiry, subsequently relieved of their commands and court-martialled. In this attack both American service men and civilians suffered many thousands of casualties.

It was a beautiful Sunday morning, and when a U.S. liner put into Honolulu in the midst of the attack, her passengers gaily crowded to the taffrail to watch what they believed was a realistic display put up by their own people as a sort of war game. As a Japanese bomb hurtled into the water a hundred yards from the liner, one passenger exclaimed delightedly to a fellow voyager: "Oh, boy, if that had been a real one!" They were quickly undeceived on a closer view of the havoc wrought to ships and shore quarters. At the same time the Japanese landed on Guam, Wake and Midway Islands, overcoming the small American garrisons after a gallant but hopeless resistance, and thus deprived America's Pacific Fleet of vital fuelling stations for any sortie across the Pacific. For some time, at any

battle zones. This enabled the Soviet to maintain an astonishing high level of essential war output despite the industrial areas that had been put out of production by enemy action. South of Leningrad energetic operations of desperate mid-winter fighting enabled the Red Army to encircle the German 16th Army, despite frantic efforts by the enemy to defeat this pincer movement. There were indications that the Germans were making special efforts to hang on at all costs on the Crimea sector, doubtless with a view to a renewed offensive in the spring towards the Caucasus and the Baku oilfields. The Russians brought up large contingents of fresh troops, well-trained and equipped, and were greatly assisted in their efforts to push back the invaders by the indomitable activities of guerilla commandos, who constantly harried the enemy's communications.

## CHAPTER XIII

## HONOURABLE SMASH-AND-GRAB

THE amazing and tragic military collapse of France had far-reaching repercussions, all extremely calamitous for us. It made instantly more imminent the risks of an invasion of these islands, and thereby compelled us to tie up forces in this country which otherwise might with immense advantage have been employed elsewhere. It exposed London, our ports, and our great industrial cities to a short-range air attack of terrific intensity whilst adding greatly to the distance our airmen had to fly in order to bomb Germany. It urgently embarrassed our position in the Mediterranean, in North and West Africa, in Syria, and, last but not least, in the Far East.

Until the last month of 1941 the third partner in the Axis, Japan, remained more or less a sleeping one. Beyond affording German sea-raiders the facilities of her ports, and the advantages of her London Embassy as an additional sounding-board to Germany's Dublin one, Japan was quiescent. But the collapse of France, and the weakness of the pusillanimous Vichy Ministry, gave the Tokyo jingoes their chance. Japan easily

jectors, and dive bombers, the Japanese gradually forced our troops, including famous British battalions, Australians, and Indians, down the peninsula. Our men were outnumbered and lacked adequate aircraft support. The conditions were appalling: an atmosphere like a Turkish bath, poisonous swamps where crocodiles squatted, thick jungles where deadly snakes and fever-laden mosquitoes swarmed and where visibility seldom exceeded ten yards, and Japanese snipers using Tommy-guns from trees and '22 miniature rifles with silencers. The latter were as inaudible as airguns.

For nearly two months our weary war-worn troops stood up manfully to these conditions, though constantly outflanked by fresh enemy coastal landings. Advance companies constantly had their headquarters scuppered behind them by Japanese infiltrating on bicycles through unknown jungle paths. Our people were seriously embarrassed, moreover, by the impossibility of distinguishing between Japanese and Malaysians. Finally a withdrawal to Singapore island, which is about the size and shape of the Isle of Wight, became imperative. The mile-long artificial causeway, sixty yards wide, connecting the mainland with the island, was destroyed in several places after our troops had passed over, but the Japanese quickly repaired these breaches, assisted therein no doubt by the fact that most of our fortress guns were seaward-aiming fixtures. The garrison was reinforced by a division which had been six weeks cramped up in troopships under sweltering heat and then found itself pitchforked straight into battle under novel and enervating conditions. Another division consisted of partly-trained troops. The Japanese pressed their attack, and, after knocking out our searchlights, effected landings by night on the mango swamps on the north-west corner of the island.

Maintaining a devastating artillery bombardment sandwiched with recurrent dive-bomber attacks, they rapidly extended their bridgeheads, and after seven days' furious fighting London heard the heavy news that General Percival, who commanded at Singapore, had been forced to unconditional surrender. The tragedy of the most inglorious disaster in the annals of British arms may in part be explained by the embarrassment of a huge native civilian population, scarcity of

rate, this achieved its object of immobilizing the U.S. Fleet so far as the western expanse of the Pacific was concerned. These carefully concerted operations were later followed by powerful military landings in the Philippine Islands, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, New Guinea and eventually Java. New Guinea is within easy bombing range of the northern coast of Australia, and it was not long before enemy planes were over Port Darwin.

In the Philippines the Americans, against fearsome odds both on the ground and in the air, put up a magnificent fight, at first under General MacArthur, and, on the latter's transference to Australia as Allied Commander-in-Chief in the Pacific, under his second-in-command. Gallantly supported by their Filipino auxiliaries, though driven out of Manila, they repulsed again and again heavy mass attacks on their positions south of the capital. This grim struggle continued, without hope of reinforcement or rescue, under most appalling conditions for five months, but eventually the heroic survivors were forced to surrender on the Island of Corregidor, the Gibraltar of the Pacific, whither they had withdrawn when the mainland was no longer tenable.

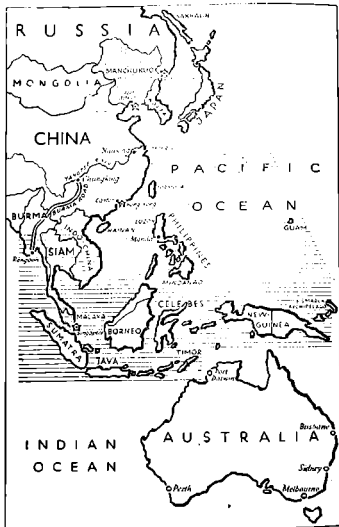
Meanwhile we had suffered serious reverses. The small British garrison at Hong Kong, including stouthearted warriors from Canada, held out for twenty-one days against overwhelming Japanese forces equipped with heavy artillery and commanding absolute monopoly of the air. Our men were forced to surrender by failure of the water supply, and the survivors, military and civilian, were shockingly treated by the Japanese. Many, helplessly bound hand and foot, were bayoneted by the exemplars of Bushido chivalry. Things went badly for us in Malaya. Admiral Phillips put out from Singapore on the battleship *Prince of Wales*, with the battle-cruiser *Repulse* and other naval units, but apparently no air support to attack Japanese landings on the Malayan coast. The *Prince of Wales*—the ship on which Mr. Churchill kept his historic Atlantic rendezvous with President Roosevelt four months earlier—and the *Repulse* were both sunk by enemy air attack from the shore. Bitter and intensive fighting developed on the Malaya mainland. Using tanks, portable mortars, flame pro-

food supplies, and seizure by the enemy of the water reservoirs. According to the Japanese we lost twenty-five-thousand men in the actual fighting and they took seventy-three-thousand prisoners. General Gordon Bennett, who commanded the Australian contingent, managed to escape from the island to Australia by a devious odyssey.

Greatly aided by the quisling attitude of the Siamese, the Japanese rapidly occupied that country, and, thrusting on into Burma, compelled us to abandon Rangoon—after that great port had been fired—and the eastern approaches to India. The sudden collapse of the Singapore defences enabled the enemy to transfer large numbers of men from that front to the Burmese sector, where our forces, under the vigorous command of General Alexander and fighting shoulder to shoulder with some of General Chiang Kai-Shek's lean and seasoned Chinese warriors, contested with dogged and desperate courage an unending rearguard battle. Time and again enemy road-blocks were carried at the bayonet point in savage fighting wherein famous Scottish and English regiments and gallant Gurkhas splendidly redeemed the débâcle of Singapore.

Last but one of the western Pacific islands over-run by the Japanese was Java, where mixed Allied forces under Dutch commanders put up a magnificent fight. Heroism touched its highest point in a hopeless endeavour by Dutch, British, and American light naval forces to intercept enemy transports. In the Macassar Straits we had been able to subject a large Japanese convoy to rough handling, but in an epic naval action off the coast of Java the Allied squadron was wiped out, fighting to the last against odds that might almost have daunted Nelson.

While our small force in Burma, under the constant ordeal of a rearguard action, fought furiously to checkmate repeated enemy attempts at encirclement, Japanese naval forces were exploring the Indian Ocean. They made a mass bombing attack from air-carriers on Colombo, but were beaten back by R.A.F. fighters with staggering losses. Nevertheless, shortly afterwards Japanese bombers sank two of our cruisers off the coast of Ceylon—catching them without "air umbrellas"—and also the small aircraft-carrier *Hermes*. Meanwhile American troops had reached Australia in considerable force; and



## 22. THE WAR IN THE FAR EAST

*Shaded area represents Japanese sphere of influence and early successes.*



Digital Folder Name	The War Up To Date_J.H. Varwell_Lomgmans, Green and Co._1942
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